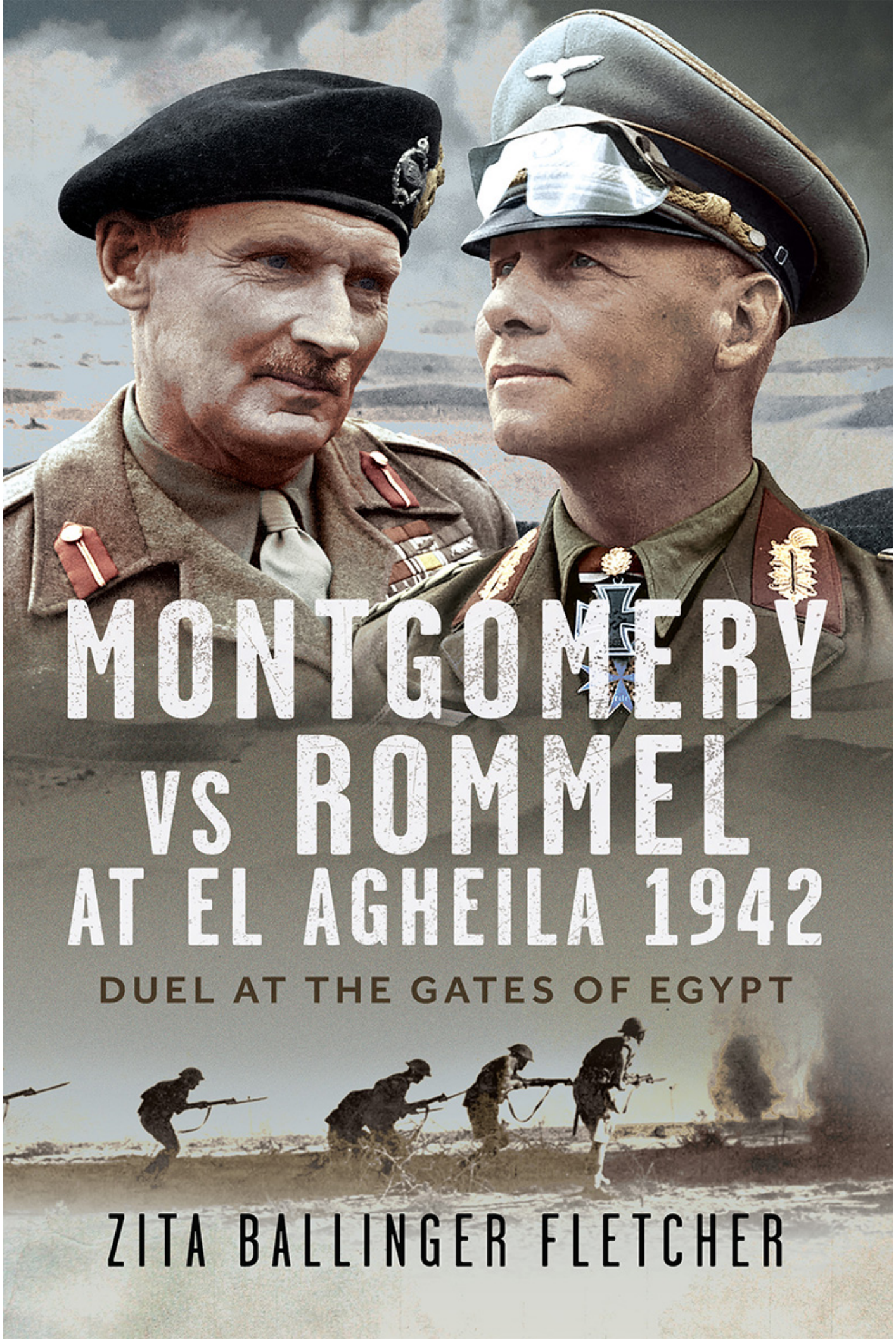
MONTGOMERY
VS ROMMEL
AT EL AGHEILA 1942
DUEL AT THE GATES OF EGYPT
ZITA BALLINGER FLETCHER

MONTGOMERY
VS ROMMEL
AT EL AGHEILA 1942

I dedicate this work to Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, who for his personal merits, courage as a soldier, brilliance as a military commander, and hard sacrifices in service to others deserves far greater recognition than has been accorded him. May present and future generations honour the memory of this fine man and be inspired by his legacy.

MONTGOMERY VS ROMMEL AT EL AGHEILA 1942

DUEL AT THE GATES OF EGYPT

ZITA BALLINGER FLETCHER

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The verses of German poetry included in this book were translated into English by the author. The author also provided English translations of passages from the German edition of Rommel's wartime memoirs, *Krieg Ohne Hass*, and other German-language material cited.

INTRODUCTION

To most men who fought in the deserts of North Africa during the Second World War, time did not seem to exist. The vast stretches of barren wasteland were deathly quiet when shells and tank explosions were not ripping men and metal apart, when flies were not swarming across soldiers' flesh and the wind was not howling during sandstorms. Time seemed to have forgotten this shifting abyss. Yet for the two generals facing each other across the hills of a choppy and tempestuous dune sea at the border of Egypt and Libya in the early winter months of 1942, time was of the essence.

Germany's Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and British General Bernard Law Montgomery were crossing swords to contest control of Egypt – a quasi-independent desert kingdom in Britain's vital interest to defend and in Nazi Germany's to seize. Monty and the 'Desert Fox' had recently faced off in a shattering clash of wills at the Second Battle of El Alamein in Egypt's Western Desert and left each other bloodied after a truly ferocious wrangling match between their armies. Montgomery, an unlikely contender, had led the British Eighth Army to victory as the star of his military glory rose over the desert. Rommel and his Afrika Korps had been dispelled into the badlands as the sun set on his previously unchallenged dominance.

Yet the desert was a treacherous master. Bad weather had slowed the British down as Montgomery chased the wily and elusive 'Fox' for literally hundreds of miles. With British supply lines strained, the elements of nature seemed to lend unearthly advantages to the fleeing Germans, who were always just out of reach as both generals' armies whirled in a dangerous dance across the Western Desert. The tables were starting to turn on Montgomery by the time he approached the ghostly white sand dunes of El Agheila in Libya. This 'bottleneck', as Monty called it, was located on the frontier between the heart of Libya and the Egyptian border, forming a vital access point to the embattled former land of the pharaohs.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the Western Desert was inhabited by evil spirits. Their supernatural dread was similar to what British troops felt towards the El Agheila position, known as the Mersa El Brega position to the Germans. El Agheila embodied the worst of what the Western Desert had to offer. Mirages deceived the senses while winds brought the sand to life. Dust storms came in all shapes and sizes, from sheets of scathing brown granules that knocked grown men off their feet and buried vehicles to small whorls that sashayed violently across the ground with smoky brown arms, tossing and whipping anything in reach. This jungle of wind, sand and sun had long served as the graveyard of British ambitions to eject Rommel from North Africa. Twice at this spot Rommel had been driven to the edge of doom and yet, like an eerie desert whirlwind himself, had somehow come lashing back to drive British troops off. As both British supply lines and hard-won courage began to crumble, Rommel coiled his forces together at his former hideout and cast a vengeful eye towards Monty and his men.

Rommel needed to keep the door to Egypt open – or better yet, dash through it unexpectedly as he had already done twice before. Montgomery needed to slam the gates to the Nile and Suez shut in his enemy's face forever. Both felt distinctly disadvantaged and neither could expect immediate reinforcements. Rommel had been left marooned in the desert for some time by Germany's leadership and chronically unable to force Adolf Hitler to care about either military objectives or soldiers' lives as the Führer obsessively monitored his troops' rampages across the Soviet Union.

Monty's men were tired from constant battle and pursuit of their enemies, but he had no immediate Allied help in the form of ground troops. The British had only recently gained military assistance in North Africa from their American allies, who had landed fatefully in French North Africa on 8 November 1942 as battle raged at El Alamein – heralding the arrival of US commanders who proved arguably more of a menace to Montgomery than Rommel in the grand scheme of things.

The two mortal enemies watched each other across the horizon with profound worry. Although eager to deal the other a killing blow, both felt it was the wrong time and place for a high-stakes battle. Yet high stakes it was. The whole world watched. The national prestige of the Third Reich and Great Britain hung in the balance. Hitler and Nazi officials hoped Rommel would rebound from what could be brushed aside as a passing crisis and, thus, preserve Germany's sense of military superiority on the global stage. The British public and Prime Minister Winston Churchill had all their hopes pinned on Monty – the first British general able to knock Nazi Germany a reeling blow and who gave the bloodied but unbowed people of England an occasion to ring church bells in triumph for the first time since the start of the war in 1939.

As the shadows of political masters loomed overhead, each general would have to plunge into another decisive duel with one arm tied behind his back, knowing that failure would be less forgiving than the desert itself. The issue would be decided with spilled blood soaking the sand, flaming tanks shimmering in the sun and a shroud of dust and smothering silence.

The stand-off at El Agheila has been dwarfed by that at El Alamein, just as the legacies of the two opposing commanders, Montgomery and Rommel, have been clouded by ill-founded myths. The Battle of El Agheila had a decisive impact on the outcome of the war. This struggle for a key access point to Egypt would see Monty and Rommel not only fight each other on the battlefield, but contend with political pressures, propaganda, the hostile desert environment, and a rare loss of confidence in themselves. In the shimmering Libyan wasteland, each man would come face to face with a weaker version of himself and be forced to confront his worst fears to find a way forward. Montgomery and Rommel were quite different in

terms of their inner characters and fighting abilities than how they have been portrayed in many histories. The duel at El Agheila would test each man's mettle in an excruciating desert furnace, altering the course of the war and each general's destiny.

PART I

SKETCHING THE OPPONENTS

CHAPTER 1

A COMMON ENEMY

‘There is a rapture on the lonely shore;
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar.’

Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*

The armies battling for control of North Africa during the Second World War would both have to reckon with a third enemy more powerful than either of them, and one with a vibrant and mysterious life of its own that no human being could tame or even fully fathom. This enemy could crush planes like pieces of paper, bury vehicles, force humans to their knees and wrench life away with either brute violence or subtle, oppressive torture. It disrupted radio signals, sabotaged tools and destroyed engines. It could deceive and betray with illusions and traps. It rebelled constantly, never to be controlled. It was the Sahara Desert, the world’s largest hot desert with a vast expanse covering most of North Africa and everywhere the fighting took place, including from the Western Desert of Egypt across Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco.

The desert is an intensely spiritual type of natural environment – for its sheer emptiness, its stormy majesty, its harshness and uncanny forces that keep its desolation alive. Some have believed that people can find God in the desert; others that it is a dwelling place of wicked sprites and devils. Centuries ago, ascetics sought out its solitude as a means of purifying their souls and opening their minds to enlightenment. Ancient Egyptians viewed the desert not only as an abode of evil spirits, but as a lurking ground of robbers and criminals, and a place that only the gods could master. Regardless of one's spiritual beliefs, the desert is truly a place that tests human souls. The Sahara in particular is one that has forged the mettle of many men even as it has destroyed others within its merciless grasp.

The Sahara is at once beautiful and deadly. It contains a wide array of different landscapes – hundreds of tiny universes within one vast volatile wilderness. Its sand dunes are as diverse and numerous as creatures in the ocean – there are undulating crescents, ripples, angles, seifs, sand 'seas' and billowing bluffs like cloud banks that pile up in odd places. Colours of the sand vary, as do the cliffs and rock formations that can be found among the dunes. Sand can form all things in the Sahara – rivers, bluffs, oceans. Some dunes can tower hundreds of feet high. These monuments of dust, shadow and light possess a natural elegance such as no human being could ever construct – one can admire them, but to tread on or touch them the wrong way could cause an avalanche of sand that can bury a person alive. The air, the ground, and the elements are in a constant state of flux. The sand shifts endlessly in the wind.

Dunes across the Sahara also are known for their strange phenomenon of spontaneously 'singing'. They produce distinct humming noises even on days when there is no wind. These vary and can sound like low, sonorous sounds or like the drone of an aircraft humming. Scientists have found that grains of sand emit frequencies. These soundwaves emit strong vibrations and can be heard for several miles away.

The wind itself wreaks its power in a manner that can seem magical or demonic depending on the erratic circumstances. The wind gives life to the sand. It makes wisps of dust wriggle over the ground in coils like snakes, stirs up whirling helixes that move like invisible revellers, and conjures

floating pillars like tornados. It also brings the plague of the Saharan sandstorm. Huge walls of violent brown granules gather from apparently nowhere and hurl themselves across the landscape with force that can exceed 100 miles an hour. Sometimes a sandstorm is preceded by a strange bluish-green haze and eerie quiet before a great, dark wall of dust reaching up to heaven and blocking all sunlight comes with a rush. A sandstorm can last, with typical caprice, for either minutes or hours. During the Second World War, the sandstorms proved deadly, wrecking aircraft and causing troops to become lost. Some men who dared to leave the insufficient safety of their quarters during sandstorms were never seen alive again. Strangely, the storms possessed electricity that disrupted communications.

A furnace by day and an icebox by night, the desert could inflict heatstroke or hypothermia with unpredictable temperatures that could increase or decrease staggeringly several times within the course of only a few hours. Stripping their clothing down during the day, troops in North Africa bundled up in greatcoats and tucked into trenches at night in attempts to maintain a tolerable body temperature. Sandstorms hiked temperatures up drastically like the switch of an oven.

Water was, of course, scarce. Soldiers went for long periods without being able to bathe and sometimes attempted to wash their clothing with gasoline, or to scrub their bodies with coarse sand. However, the sand itself carried bacteria. Far from being clean, sand granules constantly tossed through the air recycled and spread the germs they came into contact with – such as from corpses, for example. Soldiers whose open wounds were exposed to sand found that the wounds would not heal and easily contracted gangrene. Tight bandages were needed to keep the wounds clean, but it was difficult to keep anything clean in such conditions.

Although seemingly totally hostile to life, the desert was a place where resilient life forms managed to thrive. Troops in North Africa encountered vipers, scorpions, jerboas, jackals, sand foxes, gazelles, owls, lizards and desert snails, among other creatures. Flies were a problem – they drank the blood of corpses and descended in swarms to bite moisture from living human skin, requiring men to wear nets or veils to keep them off. Camel thorns and sometimes date palms grew in the loneliness.

Compasses didn't work. The desert possessed its own magnetism that thwarted them. Skilled navigators learned to be guided by the patterns of the stars, clearly visible like shimmering jewels in the night sky above. Even this was difficult.

The sun weathered the men's faces and tanned white skin to deep bronze. Some of the soldiers didn't bronze as well as others, and simply burnt and blistered. Their exposure to the sun became a badge of honour, such as it was. The desert troops could tell by looking at another man whether he too was a veteran of their seemingly eternal struggle in the wilderness – whether he had also been exposed to the same elements, and for how long. An officer who possessed a distinct military reputation but had not faced the desert was a novice to them. Whether fighting for the Axis or the Allies, troops who dwelled in the desert had realized that it wielded power beyond anything an army could muster, and only those who had battled against it as they had could command their respect.

To merely survive in the desert required a person to learn its ways as much as possible, and this demanded not only physical but mental strength. To learn to fight in the desert made even severer demands. The Sahara has often been treated as some inanimate presence in the background of great events, but in reality it was mightily alive, magnificent in its defiance, and actively involved in every game of military wits that took place within its embrace. Anyone hardy and resilient enough to become a desert warrior learned never to trust the place, and above all that overconfidence tempted disaster. Indeed the desert had a strange way of humbling people – of turning the tables, of confronting a person with their own frailty in the face of their ambitions, and thus showing world leaders and confident military men that they really weren't in control and even the best-laid plans could go wrong at any moment.

There were occasions throughout the war when, according to human logic, plans that should have gone in a particular way failed or changed due to some unexpected spell of weather or wisp of nature that meddled, or simply due to the slow, inexorable force of the Sahara exerting itself on trucks, or supply lines, or fragile human beings – generals included. In such

moments the desert stepped into the fray as both overlord and combatant, furiously and eternally on its own side.

CHAPTER 2

THE MATHEMATICIAN

‘For songs around the groves I asked, for shapes, and colours of life,
Accustomed as I was to the lovely gleam of my homeland’s meadows.
But I asked in vain – you appeared to me in fire and glory,
Yet once before I had seen you, prettier and more divine.’

Friedrich Hölderlin, *Der Wanderer*

The story of Erwin Rommel begins in the small town of Heidenheim an der Brenz, in the Kingdom of Württemberg and in a cultural and linguistic region known as Schwaben, or Swabia. Heidenheim, meaning ‘heathen home’, had in ancient times been the site of a Roman settlement, complete with a military fort and a large Roman bath. When a confederation of ethnic German tribes known as the Alemanni eventually reclaimed the area, they occupied the space where the Romans had been living. It is believed that the local Germans, upon being Christianized, started referring to the place as a ‘heathen’-ville to refer to the numerous ruins and artifacts left behind by the pagan Romans. The coat of arms of the town is the ‘*Heidenkopf*’, or ‘heathen’s head’; this barbarian is a very tame-looking gentleman with a

full beard and pointed cap. His amiable image can be seen all over the town, including sometimes on dessert pastries. The town is located in the Swabian Alps, an elevated forest region with steep, sharply rising hills, rocky rivers and crisp mountain air.

The world that Rommel came into, the Kingdom of Württemberg, was a state in the German Empire that still enjoyed some autonomy under the rule of its own king, Wilhelm II of Württemberg. Despite Prussian efforts to unify the diverse kingdoms of Germany, they failed to rid the German nation-states of their distinct and independent sense of local identity forged over many centuries. Following the dissolution of the monarchies and the introduction – and collapse – of the Weimar Republic, Adolf Hitler had more success in erasing regional loyalties in Germany, pushing the slogan, '*Ein Volk – Ein Reich – Ein Führer*' – 'one people, one realm, one leader'. Hitler and the Nazi Party aimed to rid Germans of their sense of regional identities and hammer home the idea that Germans belonged to one homogenous ethnic group under Hitler's sole rule. Nevertheless, Hitler was not entirely successful in this effort. Diverse regions of Germany have retained a strong sense of unique identity to this day.

The indigenous people of Württemberg are called Swabians. They are known for being mechanical inventors, thrifty and resourceful, with an approachable manner and a pleasant, and sometimes silly, sense of humour. The Swabian accent is less of a brogue and more of a bubbly cadence. It is a mischievous dialect with off-colour and slightly ridiculous slang words. Swabians sometimes face discrimination from other Germans. Although not known for being difficult to get along with, the sheer diligence and simplicity of Swabians irritates some. They have been stereotyped as frumpy, hard-headed, penny-pinching, and speaking in riddles, almost like a species of tinkering elves. Swabians, however, are generally delighted to be Swabian and tend to enjoy baffling people. This was true for Erwin Rommel, who retained an intense pride in his Swabian identity and would speak in dialect to fellow Swabians he encountered as a general during the Second World War.

In 1891, Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel was born on Sunday, 15 November, at his family home located close to the town's small main train

station and a mere stone's throw away from the centrally located ruins of the ancient Roman bath. His parents, Erwin Sr. and Helene, were both schoolteachers. Erwin Sr. had previously pursued a military career in the *Württembergische Armee* (the army of the Kingdom of Württemberg) as an artillery lieutenant after the Franco-Prussian War. As no wars seemed to be in his future, he made the unusual decision to retire from military service and become a school headmaster. He was a skilled mathematician, apparently having inherited his talent from his own father who had a reputation in the local community for his mathematical abilities. Helene was the eldest daughter of a prominent Württemberg politician and government official, Karl von Luz. The Rommel family descended from craftsmen. While the Rommel surname itself carried no nobility, the family, like many German craftsmen, rejoiced in the quality of their handiwork, and the family thus had a strong tradition of industriousness and attention to detail.

In appearance, Erwin Rommel had a fair complexion, chiselled features, clear blue eyes and very light blond hair which darkened somewhat with age. He was so pale that he was dubbed 'the white bear' as a child, according to his older sister. Raised as the eldest boy of four siblings, he was actually his parents' second son. His older brother, Manfred, had died in childhood; later he would name his own son after this lost brother.

Personality, Strengths and Weaknesses

Rommel was quiet and generally well behaved as a young boy. He was interested in science, excelled at mathematics (like his father and grandfather) and loved machines and building things. He also loved to draw. He made friends easily and his parents experienced no trouble with him getting into youthful fights. 'He was very good-tempered and amiable and not afraid of anyone', his older sister Helene later recalled, adding that while other children used to run away in fear from local chimney sweeps, Rommel used to approach to shake hands with them. His teenage years were awkward. He was sloppy and had terrible handwriting for the son of a schoolmaster – such bad handwriting, in fact, that nobody could read it. He

was prone to doodling and daydreaming. His school notebooks were covered with cartoons and sketches.

Despite his introspective nature, he was sociable, very energetic and excelled in sports. However he was not a competitive sportsman. In marked contrast to his future adversary, Bernard Montgomery, he seems to have had no interest in games that pitted opponents against each other, such as boxing, grappling, traditional German fencing or even football. Instead he relished activities that could be enjoyed in the company of others, such as hiking, swimming, horseback riding, and especially dancing. Although he is perceived to have been an aggressive character due to the innovative methods he used in war, Rommel had a mellow disposition.

Yet beneath his agreeable surface was a strong wilful streak. Rommel had a shortsighted and selfish aspect to his character – one that saw him sometimes focus myopically on his own immediate aims without consideration for others. This was a character flaw which remained with him, and various examples of it can be observed throughout his life and military career. It was not the totality of Rommel. He had a conscience and was capable of recognizing his flaws, and he also demonstrated a considerable amount of attachment to and concern for others, including and most especially his son Manfred and military comrades. An Achilles' heel of blinkered selfishness, however, was one of his human foibles. As a boy, Rommel embarrassed his family by deciding to lock his gears after the family relocated from his beloved hometown of Heidenheim to the larger bustling city of Aalen. Rommel refused to conform to schoolwork due to unhappiness at not being able to play outside. Despite the humiliation it must have caused his parents, particularly his schoolmaster father, Rommel stubbornly became the worst student in his class. He once ditched his religion class to sneak off to the market with his classmates. After being sentenced to detention by his teacher, the resourceful Rommel and his friends bribed the teacher with 'beer money' scraped together from the pennies they had in order to bargain for a 'lesser sentence' and prevent Rommel's father, the head of the school, from finding out about it.

Later on, he would display both impulsivity and single-minded selfishness in his early relationships with women – for which he would

express deep regret. During the First World War, his dogged pursuit of his own aims with occasional disregard for 'the bigger picture' brought him into conflict with superiors. His lack of interest in 'the bigger picture' would have drastic consequences for him during the Second World War in more ways than one.

Choosing the Army

Young Rommel's first love was engineering. In another contrast to his future Second World War foe Montgomery, Rommel had no initial desire to become a soldier. An engineering career would have been a good fit for him. It would have allowed him to draw, build things and use his skills at science and mathematics at which he excelled. He dreamed of becoming a great inventor. Interested in aircraft, he built a full-scale glider with his friends – an attempt to fly it off a precipice turned into a dangerous misadventure and resulted in some broken bones for Rommel and his friends. While he would get to pilot aircraft as an older man in the Second World War, Rommel was never able to fulfil his dream of becoming an engineer as his father refused to allow it.

Erwin Sr. apparently wanted his namesake to follow in his footsteps one way or another – he gave his son the choice of either becoming a teacher like him, or of joining the Kingdom of Württemberg's army as he had done after the Franco-Prussian War. Despite his wilful tendencies, Rommel accepted having to choose between these two options. Not knowing that one day he would become an enthusiastic instructor of military recruits and officers, Rommel supposed that a teaching career would condemn him to having to study poetry, literature or other esoteric subjects like his parents, which he found boring. His choice to become a soldier, according to his son Manfred, was about avoiding those tedious obligations.

Like his father, the young man joined the *Württembergische Armee*, entering service as an enlisted man on 19 July 1910 at the age of 18. The initial regiment Rommel served in was the 124th Infantry Regiment (König Wilhelm I, 6th Württemberg). There was an abundance of partying and

misbehaviour going on in Weingarten, the small town where he was first garrisoned.

This was Rommel's first time living by himself away from his family home. The gregarious Rommel soon developed a love for parties. Some goofy staged images show Rommel and other cadets at parties dressed in drag, a custom common in Germany especially for carnivals and general tomfoolery. As a cadet, Rommel hardly cut a very dashing or soldierly figure; he had a very boyish appearance and, although he was then 18, he looked years younger.

Marriage and Children

His early encounters with women were messy. He had two known relationships with women – Lucia Maria Mollin, who he would later marry, and Walburga Stemmer, an on-and-off girlfriend. There is some lack of clarity about which one came along first or whether indeed Rommel was two-timing both at once.

What is interesting about both girls is that they were complete outsiders from Rommel's own social class and were disadvantaged, as both lacked a male provider in their family and were struggling to get by. What attracted Rommel to them? He seems to have been adventurous in looking for girlfriends who had a different background from himself and were outside his own social circle. It's also possible he was aware that both girls needed support and, aside from enjoying their company, might have viewed himself as a gallant pillar for them to 'lean on'. It also raises the possibility that both girls became interested in the awkward young Rommel less because of his charms and more because they were looking for stability. If that was indeed the case, it wouldn't be the first time in history that women have sought out to ensnare soldiers for precisely that reason. While it can be a natural tendency to idealize the relationships of historical figures in the hues of fairytale romances, the truth may be slightly more complicated. In any case, the details of Rommel's love life remain open to speculation.

It has been claimed that Rommel courted Walburga right after he first joined his garrison, but this has not been conclusively proven. In any case,

Rommel was billeted in lodgings in the town and Walburga seems to have been the daughter of his landlady. She was of a lower social class than Rommel and her family earned money by renting out rooms and running a fruit stall. After they began a relationship, Walburga evidently complained to Rommel about her money problems. He later wrote to his sister that Walburga's mother was 'once the wealthy daughter of a noble landlord' whose husband's irresponsible behaviour had caused her to 'lose all her goods and possessions'.

Rommel left for officer cadet school in Danzig, a far-off city on the Baltic Sea located in present-day Poland, in early 1911. While there, he met Lucia Maria Mollin, known as Lucie, a Polish Catholic orphan living in a boarding school. Lucie was also a social outsider from Rommel's perspective. Germans generally discriminated against Poles. There was also a gulf between Protestants and Catholics. In Rommel's home region, Protestants and Catholics abided by different customs; debates about which rules should apply to Protestants or Catholics came up often in the school managed by Rommel's father, a devout Protestant. The differences between them did not deter Rommel from striking up a relationship with Lucie; in fact, they may have attracted him to her. When he met Lucie, she wore her hair in a daring bob, enjoyed tango dancing and was studying to be a language teacher. The pair danced, partied and embarked on a romance. Lucie later claimed that they were always accompanied by a chaperone and were never left alone together. It is impossible to prove this. Passages from letters allegedly written by Rommel to Lucie during their early courtship contain some passionate statements which suggest the couple did more in Danzig than just hold hands.

Rommel wrote regularly to Lucie after returning to Weingarten, but letters attributed to him suggest he worried Lucie had lost interest in him and he was frustrated about it. Their relationship, then a long distance one, seemed to be fizzling out in early 1913 when Rommel engaged in a sexual relationship with Walburga. She quickly became pregnant and put pressure on Rommel to abandon the army, marry her and seek out a career that would pay more money to support her. Rommel chose not to do so. Since most Germans follow a single career path for life, to change professions in

Germany always has been, and continues to be, difficult. Furthermore, Rommel received no financial support from his parents and was paying for his own military career and officer's education, in which he had already invested much. In addition to being unusual, Walburga's requests seem to have been unrealistic. Despite some rather steamy and emotional letters to Walburga in which Rommel, then in his early 20s, expressed his joy about her pregnancy and imagined a shared future together, he ultimately broke things off.

Walburga gave birth to Rommel's daughter Gertrud, who he nicknamed Trudel, in December 1913. Despite whatever strain arose between him and Walburga, Rommel demonstrated attachment and affection towards his daughter. He maintained a lifelong relationship with her, included her as part of his family and financially supported her. Before leaving for the First World War, Rommel took out a life insurance policy on himself and expressed feelings of guilt about the affair and his irresponsibility in a letter to his older sister Helene on 3 August 1914:

Should I . . . be killed, I have only one wish: to know that poor Trudel and Walburga are cared for. The 10,000 Marks of my life insurance policy will be paid to Walburga Stemmer for the upbringing of Trudel. I further request that you support Walburga with 50 Marks per month, until she is in a position to nurture and bring up Trudel without worries or for as long as you wish to support my innocent orphan child. You and Mother will surely be so kind and fulfil for me this last wish.

He added:

Should I have the providence to return healthy, it is my only goal to see that Trudel is raised well and to come to the aid of Walburga in word and deed … I can renounce every amusement with friends if I can do something good for them both; I care about them more than myself. I want to make amends for the wrong I have done.

Rommel continued his correspondence with Lucie and ultimately decided to marry her. The pair became formally engaged in 1915 and married in November 1916 during the middle of the war. At some point Lucie became aware of his illegitimate daughter and is said to have accepted the situation, although their relationship as a married couple appears to have been somewhat brittle and distant in contrast to their happy start in Danzig. Unlike pictures the gregarious Rommel took with other people – including Walburga, friends and family – photos of Rommel and Lucie together appear cold, restrained and somewhat forced; the couple rarely appear smiling together, touching or looking spontaneously happy in each other's company. Furthermore, Rommel continued – despite Lucie's later assertions that he had few interests outside of his home life – to enjoy parties, dancing and socializing. Even as an older man, Rommel cut a dapper appearance at balls and events. Photos taken throughout his lifetime show him looking lively posing with other women – arguably a bit livelier than he appears in most photos with Lucie.

Some theories hold that he perceived some advantage in choosing Lucie over Walburga, but in fact neither of the two women were an ideal choice for an ambitious young German officer in terms of career advancement. Lucie's Polish background meant she was not a historically 'ideal' wife for a German officer. Most of Rommel's military peers married ethnic German women. The matter of Lucie's non-German origins later caused a crisis for the family during the Third Reich when Lucie was confronted with the demand to prove her 'Aryan ancestry'. She faced extreme difficulty in doing so and was only able to vouch as far back as her grandparents after much effort and with help from an uncle in Poland. While other Germans divorced inconvenient non-Aryan spouses to ingratiate themselves with the Nazis, Rommel did not do so. However, despite its stability and longevity, the relationship between Rommel and Lucie does not seem to have been the picture-perfect romance painted by post-war literature.

After a decade of marriage without issue, Rommel and Lucie had their first and only child, Manfred, on Christmas Eve in December 1928. Rommel adored his son and the two shared a close and loving relationship. Numerous private photos show Rommel as a very attentive father

constantly by his son's side. Yet this happy addition to Rommel's family was preceded by a dark event that stirred up shadows of the past. Two months before the birth of Manfred, Walburga Stemmer died, officially due to pneumonia but reputedly due to suicide by overdose. Allegedly Walburga had been keeping close tabs on her former boyfriend and is said to have hoped he would remain childless and eventually come back to her. She is alleged to have killed herself in despair when it became clear Lucie would not miscarry. Whatever the real cause, her death almost certainly caused distress to Rommel's family shortly before the birth of his second child.

After her mother's death, then 13-year-old Gertrud lived with Rommel's unmarried older sister, Helene. Photos show Rommel brought his daughter along on family outings. He appears to have enjoyed being with both of his children and encouraged a relationship between Trudel and Manfred. However, it is unknown what Lucie's opinions were about these arrangements. Manfred as a child was allegedly told that Gertrud was his cousin. In post-war interviews, Lucie claimed that no other woman aside from her had ever existed in Rommel's life, effectively airbrushing away Rommel's relationship with his daughter, who did not become known as such until after her death in 2001. People were shocked to discover Gertrud's existence due to depictions – largely created by Lucie – of Rommel as a devoted family man who epitomized matrimonial fidelity. Rommel was posthumously accused of having been a cad for fathering an illegitimate daughter and hiding her from the world. But had Rommel truly wished to hide Gertrud? It has been implied that because Manfred knew her as a cousin and Rommel signed his name in letters to her as 'Uncle Erwin', that Gertrud was someone Rommel wished to keep at a distance.

This doesn't seem to add up based on Rommel's persistent caring behaviour towards his daughter and his decisions to include her among his family. Photos from his private albums show him spending time together with both of his children, with Lucie present as well as his mother and sister. After Gertrud's death, it was revealed that she possessed piles of letters from her father, who wrote to his 'Trudel' constantly during the Second World War. While serving in North Africa, Rommel also very publicly wore a yellow scarf that his daughter had knitted for him. This

scarf appeared in countless publicity photographs and newsreels, and became as much a part of Rommel's image as his peaked service cap and goggles. Rommel knew that images of him wearing the scarf would go around the world and Gertrud would see him wearing it. This seems to have been not only an affectionate gesture from father to daughter, but also a proud one. In prominently displaying the scarf, Rommel made Gertrud a part of his victories. Thus, there is ample evidence to suggest that Rommel loved his daughter and did not regret her existence. It does not appear that he ever wished to exclude her from his life. It leaves one wondering whether Gertrud's living arrangements with Rommel's sister and her designation as a 'cousin' might in fact have been due to Lucie being unwilling to accept Gertrud or being uncomfortable with acknowledging her.

All in all, Rommel may or may not have been a model husband. Yet he was unquestionably a responsible and devoted father who loyally supported his family.

The First World War

During the First World War, Rommel served in combat from 1914 until January 1918 when, to his 'great sorrow', he was posted away from his unit to serve as a staff officer behind the lines – a duty he held in so much disdain that he did not even record his experiences as a staff officer in writing. He ended the war with the rank of *Hauptmann* having received Germany's highest decoration for valour, the *Pour le Mérite*, also known as the Blue Max.

He began the war as an infantryman and then became part of an elite *Gebirgsjäger* (mountain ranger) unit. German mountain rangers are equivalent to Special Forces; they are expected to fight in small groups with a great deal of independence, to master all manner of harsh and rugged environments and weather, and to fight with minimal assistance from other units. *Gebirgsjäger* units are entitled to a special type of cultural admiration in German-speaking nations and proudly wear the symbol of the Edelweiss, a small white mountain flower known not only for its beauty but for its

resilience in harsh Alpine environments. Having grown up in the Swabian Alps and being especially talented at skiing and hiking, Rommel excelled at being a mountain ranger and developed a keen pride in his own abilities and those of his unit. This pride and sense of rugged independence would remain with him for life and also be reflected in the esprit de corps he forged with his troops in the deserts of North Africa.

Rommel's First World War experiences are well documented. He wrote about and published them in a 1937 book entitled *Infanterie greift an!* (*Infantry Attacks!*) which became very popular and brought him to the attention of the Führer and Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler, with drastic results for the trajectory of Rommel's life. The book contains tactical lessons which have endured the test of time and are required reading for many military officers today. However, the book itself was poorly translated into English during the Second World War by the US Army, and this desiccated translation, censored and utterly bereft of Rommel's writing flair, became the most well-known version among English-language readers. The information that was lost (and has since been retranslated by this author into English) brings unknown and overlooked details of Rommel's war experience and approach as a writer to light. Among other things, Rommel's bond with his troops and tendency to see himself as an ordinary soldier ran deep – so much so that it affected his writing style and word choices regarding wartime hardships.

On the whole, Rommel's experience in the First World War was more mobile than that of his future adversary, Montgomery. Rommel had some horrifying experiences in the trenches but was not stuck in them for the duration of the war. As a mountain ranger, he enjoyed great freedom of movement and was able to make use of geographical features to his own advantage. He was also fascinated by firepower. He was shot twice during the war – the first time in the thigh, and later in the forearm – and once sustained a bad ankle injury during a rockslide. Of these wounds, the thigh injury, which occurred at close range, was the most severe. Physicians initially thought that Rommel would lose his ability to walk. Although the wound took a long time to heal, Rommel, using a cane and a thigh brace, was back on the frontline and even riding horses as soon as he could

physically manage. Nevertheless, unlike Montgomery, Rommel received no injuries to any major vital organs.

The young German infantryman is said to have been 'lucky' in combat, but there was a science behind his good fortune. Rommel pioneered concealment, stealth and surprise to achieve his aims. He also took great pains to protect himself and his men. He continuously used his engineering skills to fortify shelters from shot and shell, and refined digging tunnels to an art form. Rommel trained his men to use shovels to dig deep foxholes to guard against enemy fire before taking action. In many ways, Rommel actually showed more of a cautious disposition in battle than Montgomery.

Rommel was, however, a very hands-on fighter. He preferred to improvise and make decisions based on his own observations. For this reason, he preferred to serve as an infantry 'point man' – a soldier who walked first in an infantry column. Walking point, as it is known, is very dangerous. Because a soldier in this role is moving ahead of the rest of his unit, he is often the first to have contact with the enemy, whether or not he expects it; point men are often the first to be spotted and shot, or to walk into booby traps. Rommel was exceptionally stealthy. He had a gift for creeping up on people and using camouflage. He was rarely taken by surprise.

By the time the war ended, Rommel had been assigned to a staff position behind the lines and was particularly aggrieved at having been forcibly separated from his troops – an experience that would be echoed later during his Second World War career. For the rest of his life, he remained preoccupied with his memories of the First World War. After the war ended, Rommel never stopped reliving it. He reviewed and analyzed his war diaries, gave speeches and lectures based on his experiences, sought out old comrades and organized outdoor group activities with them, such as skiing and building a lodge with them. He formed an Old Comrades' Association to socialize with First World War veterans and provide financial aid for veterans in need during the 1920s, which was a difficult period in Germany due to poverty, crime and inflation. Rommel wore his *Pour le Mérite* medal constantly until it chipped and faded. He revisited his former battlefields, taking his wife Lucie with him. During this journey he visited

and photographed the graves of comrades and meticulously drew maps of the areas they fought in so that he could illustrate his troops' actions clearly to military students. His preoccupation with the war culminated in his aforementioned *Infantry Attacks!* memoir, a combination of tactical lessons and reminiscences.

The First World War also seems to have left Rommel with significant trouble sleeping. In his memoir, he described experiencing gruesome nightmares on many occasions and a chronic inability to sleep during the war. This does not appear to have subsided after the war ended, as his Second World War letters to his wife also often mention his inability to sleep. During both wars, Rommel habitually avoided rest, choosing to deliberately remain active and on his feet until experiencing a 'crash period' when his body simply started to shut down from exhaustion. He would try to get by on a mere two to three hours of rest, if any. In both conflicts, this led him to experience fainting spells and blackouts. During the First World War, Rommel once developed a fever and delirium from over exhaustion. In North Africa he was prescribed sleeping medication by a doctor to physically force him to rest. After sustaining a quadruple skull fracture when his car was strafed near Normandy in 1944, Rommel refused doctors' orders to sleep during his recovery and instead insisted on getting up and being active. In post-war literature Rommel was sometimes regarded as having an extraordinarily 'restless' disposition, but in fact he was likely suffering from what would now be recognized as a severe case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). A hallmark symptom of PTSD is difficulty with sleep onset, or the process of falling asleep. Rommel's unusual hyperactivity also suggests a link with this underlying problem. His inability to rest ultimately impacted his performance as a combat soldier and in commanding battle.

After the First World War, Rommel did not fight in any other wars or perform any military service outside of Central Europe. One of his assignments was serving as a police chief in Schwäbisch Gmund, the same town where he attended high school. He spent most of his time in Germany and occasionally travelled to neighbouring countries for leisure. This is in contrast to his opponent, Montgomery, who had more combat experience

and also experience living, working and fighting in diverse countries and climates.

Rommel and Nazism

Like many other German officers, Rommel was unhappy with the conditions imposed upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War. He supported Germany having a strong military. However, his political views are unclear. According to his son, Rommel was deliberately apolitical as a matter of principle. However it is difficult to believe that Rommel had no political opinions. A study of his actions and expressed views imply he was an independent operator who leaned centre left of the political spectrum. He once instructed his wife to vote for a Social Democrat. He was not a nationalist, although he certainly had patriotic feelings about Germany and praised German troops in his writing. Rommel expressed no racist, hateful or extremist views during his life.

Rommel was not a member of the Nazi Party and received no Nazi Party orders or decorations during his lifetime. He did not use Nazi buzzwords, such as 'Führer' or 'Fatherland', in his First World War memoir despite the fact that it was published in 1937 and such references would have been most welcome in the Third Reich. This is noteworthy, because being a Nazi and vocally supporting Hitler was encouraged in all levels of German society; indeed open shows of support for Hitler were often demanded of German citizens in various situations. It has been suggested that Rommel's restraint in expressing his political opinions were due to the fact that he was the product of a system in which officers were supposed to be non-political; this theory was advanced particularly by his son Manfred.

But the Third Reich was a new era in Germany, one in which the old social order was clearly being done away with, and most officers were not in fact 'apolitical'. Therefore Rommel could easily have joined the Nazi Party or expressed Nazi beliefs and have been none the worse for it if he had wished to do so. Indeed Rommel's contemporary Field Marshal Ferdinand Schörner is an interesting case study in terms of career soldiers being welcomed into the political arena. Schörner's career is a dark

silhouette of Rommel's – a shadow reflecting what Rommel might have become if he had chosen a Nazi path. Like Rommel, Schörner was also a career soldier from South Germany; he was also an army mountain ranger, had fought in one of the same battles as Rommel during the First World War, and he was also a *Pour le Mérite* recipient. Unlike Rommel, Schörner joined the Nazi Party in the 1930s and was very vocal in his support for Hitler and Nazism. His career benefited. Schörner was ultimately named head of the German Army High Command (*Oberkommando des Heeres*, OKH) in Hitler's last testament in 1945.

Since being a Nazi was encouraged throughout German society, Rommel had every opportunity to become one and had no reason not to apart from his own convictions. During the Second World War, he did not make use of his military successes to enrich himself or his family; he did not steal works of art or take over Jewish-owned businesses. He did not use concentration camp victims or POWs as his personal slaves. His wartime photo collection contains no images reflecting Nazi ideology – such as of propaganda images or objects related to Hitler, statues, symbols or flag displays – nor does it contain any gruesome 'trophy' images of enemy corpses. Rommel did not order any massacres nor commit war crimes. He also did not distance himself from his 'non-Aryan' Polish wife or her family. According to his son, Rommel attempted to guarantee the safety of Lucie's uncle, a Polish Catholic priest; this relative went missing and Rommel was unsuccessful in efforts to locate him or find out what happened, but Manfred learned after the war that this relative had been shot by the Gestapo. Rommel was effectively fired from an assignment to train Hitler Youth after knocking heads with Baldur von Schirach about the Nazi ideological aspects of the boys' education programme. According to Rommel's son, von Schirach complained to Martin Bormann in 1935 that Rommel was 'not a National Socialist'.

During the Second World War, the Nazi Propaganda Ministry headed by Joseph Goebbels created a fictional biography of Rommel that cast him as a Nazi storm trooper. This was disseminated to the public, including in the Allied press, and has had a lasting impact on perceptions of Rommel. Nazi propagandists would not have needed to invent a Nazi background for

Rommel if he had indeed already been a Nazi. While a careerist would have embraced Nazi ideology openly in words and deeds, if not out of belief then out of a desire for advancement, Rommel did not do so although it would certainly have brought him more military power, advantages and likely political privileges. Added to all of this is the significant fact that Rommel was ultimately killed on 14 October 1944 on Hitler's orders for taking a stand against the regime, although the details surrounding his knowledge of and involvement in the 20 July 1944 assassination attempt against Hitler remain debated.

So if Rommel was neither a Nazi nor a careerist, why did he serve in the *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War? Two reasons come to mind. One is that being a German soldier was a central part of Rommel's identity and he probably never would have remotely considered leaving Germany or ceasing to be anything but a German military officer regardless of who was running the country. The second reason lies in Rommel's central character flaw – a propensity for blind selfishness. Rommel had a chip on his shoulder about wanting to succeed in the military. He had developed his own theories about war and believed in his own abilities but was not taken as seriously by other officers as he wished to be due to his lack of a formal Prussian military education, which other officers possessed. He was an outsider to Germany's military 'establishment' – a maverick with a thick countrified South German accent who had come up through the ranks. He wanted a chance to perform. After reading his war memoir, Hitler would open doors for him, welcoming Rommel into military briefings and treating him as if his ideas were important. Rommel was 'flattered to have found such a famous reader' of his military textbook, according to his son. It was easy for Rommel to walk through the doors Hitler opened and seize those opportunities – thinking only of himself and his goals, he likely believed he had no reason not to.

Rommel came into close contact with Hitler for the first time when 'the Führer', having been impressed by *Infantry Attacks!*, requested he lead the *Führerhauptquartier*, a role that saw Rommel manage Hitler's bodyguards and security staff during the 1939 invasion of Poland. Rommel was thus given the 'honour' of protecting Hitler and managing security affairs within

Hitler's headquarters. While in Poland, Hitler, who had himself served in the trenches of the First World War, ate simple meals, got out among the troops and showed no fear of danger. Rommel witnessed this behaviour and was reputedly impressed by Hitler's down-to-earth manners and supposed leadership qualities. Nevertheless Rommel did not become part of Hitler's 'Inner Circle' who frequented the Führer's private abode at Berchtesgaden – although he probably could have without too much trouble. Hitler himself did not mix well with certain members of the aristocratic Prussian military elite, many of whom viewed him as a meddling country bumpkin as much as they did Rommel. From Hitler's perspective, the outsider Rommel was just the type of general worth investing in.

Rommel's views of Hitler would unravel during the war – particularly at the time of the 1942 Battle of El Agheila. In North Africa, his personal loyalty to Hitler would shatter in the sands of the desert as he watched his men die. As his fame increased and his military role brought him into closer and more regular contact with his country's leadership, Rommel's bubble of blind self-interest would totally pop. He was confronted with moral dilemmas that forced him to look beyond his own narrow sphere of existence. His decision to oppose Hitler ultimately resulted in his death on 14 October 1944.

Approach to War

Rommel was a creative type. Although the friendly, messy and distracted boy from Heidenheim would have seemed like an unlikely candidate to become 'the Desert Fox', Rommel would be able to apply his natural talents to his military career with magnificent results. Rommel later told his son that joining the army had a permanent and positive impact upon him as it had taught him discipline. Although he grew to love this orderliness as he matured, Rommel remained much unchanged. He would never lose his tendency towards introspection, his love for mathematics and engineering, his amiable and outgoing nature, or his passion for drawing – nor would his sloppy handwriting ever completely improve.

War became a problem-solving exercise for him. Lack of imagination within the German army at large was a constant source of frustration to him. He saw solutions to military situations through a different lens and he knew it. Eventually becoming a military instructor, he would attempt to teach other officers to think outside the box, too.

He remained a calm, mellow presence who not only bonded with his men but befriended them. He considered himself a common infantryman and one of the troops – part of the group rather than as someone set in a higher role above them. His desire to treat his men as comrades and brothers above all else was one he carried with him from the frontlines of the First World War. This would prove both one of Rommel's most inspiring attributes as a general but also arguably one of his military weaknesses. Once while accompanying his men to a winery in the Remstal countryside near Stuttgart in the interwar years, he suddenly raised his glass and declared, 'My name's Erwin!' The gesture was meant to encourage subordinates to speak to him informally on a first-name basis. Nobody took him up on it. Yet he earned the love of his troops by choosing to treat them with warmth and personal respect rather than lord his authority over them – a highly uncommon approach to military leadership in Germany at the time. He liked to perform physical labour alongside his men, to mix with them in the front lines, and to eat rations with them as if he were one of them. This was in contrast to Montgomery and would prove a double-edged sword for Rommel in North Africa.

Rommel approached warfare unemotionally and mathematically. Unlike Monty, he kept personality out of it – even his own. He showed little interest in historical or political figures. He viewed every situation and military objective as an exercise in problem-solving. This is why he excelled as a tactician. Once he had come up with an efficient – and oftentimes very creative – solution, nothing could stop him from putting it into play, especially if he calculated that the move would be more efficient or spare the lives of his men. He was willing to disobey or disregard orders if he believed that his superiors had come up with an incorrect 'solution' to a problem at hand. He developed a disdain for superior officers who were unfamiliar with conditions on the frontlines, not necessarily because he

viewed them as weaker, but because he believed their lack of familiarity with conditions at the front made them less capable of finding the correct solutions to the 'problems' of reaching objectives and executing campaigns. Often he would calculate his moves based on whether he could get away with something – taking into account not only the potential reactions of his enemy, but also of his superiors. Most of the time, Rommel's estimates proved correct, and this gave him a sense of confidence and a willingness to be daring. Rommel was allergic to the accusation that he was a military gambler and maintained his decisions had been carefully weighed in advance. Interestingly, similar sentiments were echoed by British SAS legend Robert Blair 'Paddy' Mayne about his combat decisions.

Rommel was not infallible and some of his decisions were questionable, such as one notable instance in the First World War in which he led his men charging straight through a German artillery barrage, and other instances during the same war in which he denied his men food and rest because he figured everybody could get along without it. His troops ended up fumbling an attack due to hunger and exhaustion – factors which oddly enough Rommel did not weigh into his post-battle analysis. There were times when he clearly took risks.

Although Rommel's overall approach to war was taken through the lens of cold logic, this detachment extended only to winning battles. Rommel's First World War memoir shows he had a high regard for human life and was not out to kill people. He preferred to sneak up on his enemies, intimidate them with a show of force and bluster them into surrendering. This happened countless times. Even when it was arguably dangerous or inconvenient for himself and his troops to accomplish, Rommel preferred to ask for surrenders and take prisoners. He helped enemy wounded and encouraged his troops to do so as well; during both world wars, he shared food and cigarettes with POWs and invited them to meals. Rommel saved the life of an Italian POW who was drowning and personally intervened to stop his men from hurting Italian POWs in anger after a fight in the First World War. During the Second World War, he saved British soldier Roy Wooldridge, captured before the D-Day invasion in 1944, from being shot and gave him beer and cigarettes. He had a mischievous sense of humour

and clearly enjoyed taking his foes by surprise and deception – as much as one would enjoy beating an opponent with a particularly cheeky move in a game of chess. He did not approach war with a belligerent attitude nor a desire for violence.

As for his own men, he had a fierce devotion to them and would do anything for them. When his comrades were killed, he mourned – recording their names for posterity, giving them burial services, and if time and circumstance permitted, revisiting or photographing their gravesites. As attached as he was towards his men, Rommel was an extremely difficult commander in terms of the demands he placed upon them; food, rest and human comforts did not often figure into his calculations and seemed superfluities to him. His lack of attention to the personal aspect of soldiering impacted his care for himself – or lack thereof – as well. This would come back to bite him later.

He was very down-to-earth and continued to want to be the 'point man' – to observe situations for himself so that he could problem-solve more effectively, and also to mix with his troops. He was constantly up ahead with forward units and darting around to various places to have a first-hand look at things. Always on the move, he expected his administration to meet his demands and 'catch up' with him. He was unpredictable, and of course this game of 'catching up' did not play out well with his administration, which often became dislocated. Rommel had little understanding or appreciation of staff work; he had once served on a staff against his will and had such disdain for being away from the battlefield that he had not bothered to learn much of anything during his assignment, which he escaped from as soon as he could. He tended to blame administrative difficulties on lack of initiative or laziness on part of his staff. Management skills were not one of Rommel's talents.

Rommel approached war sometimes like a game. He liked to improvise. He was interested in interactions with his opponents and sought contact with them. He was creative and opportunistic, constantly exploiting new situations. He took an almost social view of warfare, as his actions 'conversed' with the enemy in a way and he would adapt to what the enemy was doing. Rommel enjoyed the experience of sparring with his enemies

and especially in catching them off guard with mischievous and unusual methods. He also tended to be empathetic to the enemy; war, after all, was not personal for him.

This was a marked contrast to Montgomery, who was so domineering and aggressive that he was not at all interested in a chess game with his opponent. Monty derived great personal satisfaction from beating enemies. Monty's style, as we will see, was to throw away the chessboard and go for the jugular. The two men could not have been more different.

CHAPTER 3

A DANCE TOWARDS THE NILE

‘Just let me get hold of my saddle!
Stay in your little houses and your tents!
And I, joyous, will ride far into the limitless distance,
With only the stars above my cap.’

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Freisinn*

When Erwin Rommel arrived in Libya in February 1941, it was the first time in his life he had set foot on the African continent and he was unfamiliar with tropical service. Rommel had been hardened to the rigours of harsh environments through perilous mountain warfare during the First World War and was already a seasoned tank commander in Germany’s *Wehrmacht*, having spearheaded the 7th Panzer Division’s assault across Belgium and France in May and June 1940. The campaign had been a blazing success, in which Rommel’s unit – earning the epithet of ‘*die Gespensterdivision*’, or ‘Phantom Division’ – had chased British

Expeditionary Force (BEF) troops to the beaches of Northern France and captured not only French General Marcel Ihler's troops but the entire 51st Highland Division plus its commander General Robert Fortune and his staff at the modest port town of St. Valery-en-Caux.

That wasn't a bad start for a career infantryman who had never before commanded tanks in battle, and Rommel knew it. He had saved countless photos of the surrender at St. Valery, which he took pains to caption with pencil scribblings that were noticeably neater than his usual lackadaisical handwriting. This was less due to conceit than self-affirmation. Rommel had spent years analyzing his experiences to develop a distinct military philosophy. Yet despite his efforts, many of Rommel's military peers looked down on him. As in most European armies at the time, the backbone of Germany's officer corps was a rigid reef of aristocrats – members of a self-appointed Prussian 'warrior caste' who viewed Rommel as a meddlesome and under-qualified rustic. He was much younger than most of them and lacked not only what they viewed as breeding and bearing but also the trappings of a proper Prussian military education, which saw men strive to function rather than innovate.

The free-spirited Rommel had always believed a commander learned more about his trade by the sweat of his brow on the battlefield than what any textbook could offer. In 1940, he had seized his moment, hurtling across the countryside at the head of his troops and manning the turret of his own tank. He was nearly killed on more than one occasion as he strove onward – reconnoitring ahead, personally bringing his troops forward, directing his own artillery fire and constantly improvising. At St. Valery, twelve Allied generals, along with scores of French troops and proud Scottish Highlanders, had cast down their arms and stood before Rommel in the town's market square in a formal scene that echoed something of Lionel Royer's 1899 painting of Vercingetorix relinquishing his martial pride beneath the glare of a triumphant Julius Caesar. German Propaganda Ministry photographers snapped away. Rommel held his head high, enjoying his moment of vindication. He had proved all his critics wrong.

The exhilaration was quick to fade. Although Rommel believed and hoped the entire war would end with a peace treaty after the capitulation of

France, he soon learned it would continue. It would not be the last time that Hitler's war aims would surprise him. Rommel's unit was garrisoned in the countryside of Bordeaux, France, which left him unimpressed. While other German soldiers poured into Paris and were quick to avail themselves of wine, art and female company, Rommel orbited around the countryside billets and worked on improving the journal he had kept of his 7th Panzer Division's recent campaign through Belgium and France. Rommel showed little interest in France or its cultural offerings. The weather was damp and the billets had no heating or running water. He scribbled sullen letters to his wife about his discomfort.

Christmas leave in 1940 took him home to Wiener Neustadt, Austria, where he had been living as commander of the esteemed *Theresianische Militärakademie*, founded by the renowned Austrian empress Maria Theresa, beneath whose statue he sometimes posed with staff and students. Rommel owned a large home there, which he had carefully furnished; he had a bright office space to himself in addition to a '*Herrenzimmer*' salon full of plush armchairs and deer-antler hunting trophies where he could relax with male friends. During his winter break, he seized the opportunity to spend time with his 12-year-old son Manfred, a rambunctious boy who he sometimes worried in wartime letters was growing up too fast without him. Manfred's birthday was on Christmas, making the winter holiday an extra special one for the family. Father and son frolicked outdoors despite the worsening effect of the cold and damp on Rommel's flaring case of arthritis. Manfred built a snowman outside the house, and a snowball fight erupted during an outing; Rommel was quick to snap a photo of his wife right after she got caught in the crossfire. Nobody knew it, but these short happy days in Austria were the last carefree ones Rommel would enjoy with his family. The remaining three years of his life would see him fighting constantly on the frontlines or immersed in councils of war, and either worried, sick or wounded during his brief periods of return.

Rommel's holiday leave was cut short when he was ordered to return to Bourdeaux to safeguard against a possible uprising in France's unoccupied zone. Amid military training exercises, he and other officers went on 6 January 1941 to see a screening of a new German film, *Das Herz der*

Königin, 'The Heart of the Queen' – an anti-British propaganda piece billed as a historical epic about Mary Queen of Scots and starring the Third Reich cinema's favourite bombshell, Zarah Leander. Again he attempted to go home, but yet another order came – this time from on high. On his second night with his family, he received a personal summons from Hitler that sent Rommel rushing out of his house in uniform without having packed or knowing what it was all about. Time would hasten him towards a cruel fate from that moment onwards.

A Competition Between Dictators

Arriving in Spandau, Berlin on 6 February 1941, Rommel met with Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch and Hitler. He was entrusted with what seemed an urgent and immediate mission to assist Germany's allies in North Africa. The Italian Army had been roundly defeated and humiliated after Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, in a fit of envy, had attempted to out-Blitzkrieg his German allies by marching into British-controlled Egypt. Although theoretically independent, neutral and led by its own king, Egypt was subject to de facto occupation by British troops guarding the Suez Canal and was perceived by many as a British possession; while Egyptian nationalists chafed at what they viewed as foreign domination, enterprising locals capitalized off the British presence. Having free run of Egypt gave the British distinct advantages in terms of controlling the Middle East and global shipping. Mussolini happened to be next door in Libya and decided he was going to upset the Egyptian apple cart for no other reason than just because he could. He presumed too much, however. On 13 September 1940, a total of 80,000 proud Italian soldiers had cruised over the border across Egypt's Western Desert in parade formation for about 60 miles before being thrown out on their ear shortly afterwards, leaving the British threatening Italian Libya. Mussolini's invasion seemed to be going in reverse.

News of a British attack on Sidi Barrani near the Egyptian-Libyan border struck Rome 'like a thunderbolt', the Duce's son-in-law and Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano scribbled in his diary in December 1940. 'Things

are really going badly in Libya', Ciano recorded among the details of political and military debacles. Instead of a glorious march to Cairo, the Duce had gotten a very British thorn in his side in the form of Operation Compass, in which British troops had not only booted the Italians out of their own backyard but realized that they could easily reach across the Libyan border and push Italian buttons. It left the Italian military leadership more than slightly flustered.

Marshal Rodolfo Graziani was supposed to be fending the British off, but had become frightened after a previous assassination attempt in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where he was despised by the local population for his acts of cruelty. Having once fallen unceremoniously through a hole in the floor of a church, which he was convinced had been a deliberate trap, and more recently missed by a shower of grenades thrown at him by assassins in February 1937 which left him with over 300 shrapnel wounds, Graziani had retreated for his own safety into a four-room villa in Cyrene, Libya which contained a cellar leading down to an ancient Ptolemaic tomb about 30m underground. From there he supposedly commanded Italian troops against the British. This unusual choice for headquarters was to become a bone of contention between Graziani and the belligerent Duce, who was frustrated by Graziani's indecision as well as his cowardice.

Mussolini had hoped that Graziani, who had enjoyed a fearsome reputation thanks to his vicious acts against the Ethiopian population, would make an ideal candidate to lead a triumphant Italian sweep into Egypt. In a letter on 19 August 1940, the Duce wrote to his chosen warrior that he was supposed to charge into Egypt as a parallel performance to the planned Nazi invasion of Great Britain. 'So, on the day when the first platoon of German soldiers touches English soil, you will simultaneously attack', reasoned Mussolini, although he later changed his mind about whether it mattered that the Germans had even invaded England or not. The important thing to Mussolini was getting some prestige. Yet while he had no problem bullying poorly-armed local tribes, Graziani had balked at the idea of squaring off against the renowned, well-organized and well-equipped soldiers of the British Army. The Duce observed the destined hero of Italy withering in the face of danger and attempted to ease his worries with the words: 'Graziani,

I'm not demanding the conquest of Alexandria … I have never imposed a territorial objective. All I want you to do is to attack!'

Graziani proved petrified with indecision. This was an unexpected reaction from the Marshal of Italy who had been so defensive of his masculinity in the wake of his 1937 shrapnel wounds that he had himself photographed stark naked by a professional cameraman to prove his manhood to Mussolini – a bizarre gesture which was even too much for Mussolini himself, and to which the Duce did not respond. Facing the responsibility of making war against the British, however, Graziani lost his bravado. His Ethiopian NCO noted that, 'His Excellency [Graziani] lit forty cigarettes a day even though afterwards he would only smoke five or six', creating a mountain of cigarette butts as his political foes watched on with no small degree of *schadenfreude*. 'Let's see how our "warrior of instinct" will get himself out of this one', Italian Marshal Pietro Badoglio was heard to gloat.

The reluctant Marshal did attack, clumsily and without any strategic vision of his own. At the same time he fumed in his diary, showering everyone he could think of with all manner of scathing names and inventing a conspiracy theory that his political rivals in Rome had set him up to fail. The majority of his troops were either non-motorized or poorly motorized, meaning that many soldiers lacked functioning wheels to get away quickly after the short-lived spurt of their advance was inevitably turned helter-skelter in the other direction by a fierce – and very motorized – British response. In September 1940, the Italian fascist government had produced a propaganda poster showing a grand image of the spirit of the ancient Roman conqueror Scipio Africanus wrapped in a flowing cape and marching triumphantly beside a mounted Graziani. Yet Graziani would do no marching, not even enough to have allowed a ghostly Scipio's cape to flutter behind him in retreat. Much to Mussolini's outrage, Graziani remained the commander of the catacombs, relaying orders sporadically while refusing to budge from his four rooms and underground shelter. That Graziani was cowering was bad enough, but the fact that his chosen refuge was an ancient tomb made the Duce even more incandescent with humiliation.

Added to Mussolini's woes were hysterical pleas from Graziani's wife to rescue her husband from the campaign he was supposed to be leading, a general sense of disillusionment among the Italian public about recent military flops, and arrogant behaviour on the part of the Germans who – in the eyes of many Italian leaders, including Ciano and Mussolini – were treating Italy as a junior partner in the Axis alliance. While Mussolini initially fronted a calm attitude about the disasters in North Africa, a domino effect of defeats gave way to squabbles with his generals and bouts of private depression.

Despite these travails, Mussolini remained determined to launch another invasion – of Greece this time, which he discussed buoyantly with Hitler during a summit in Florence on 28 October 1940. The Germans were not best pleased with Italy's headlong plunge into Greece but kept a lid on their distaste. 'Mussolini wouldn't let anything stop him', wrote Hitler's Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels in his diary the next day, adding, 'He's also trying to get whatever he possibly can', with reference to seizing territory. Mussolini sensed the Germans' disapproval but remained, according to Ciano, 'in very good humour'. Envious of Hitler, the Duce was trying hard to flex his military muscles. Unfortunately for Mussolini, his military turned out to be in weaker shape than he had imagined. The attack on Greece did not go well, as the Italians quickly discovered there the same ferocious defiance that in ancient times had kept the Peloponnesian War going for 27 years and made legends of the Spartans. Another disaster was in the making, and it did nothing to improve Italy's situation in North Africa. Matters in Libya continued to go awry.

After the spectacular fall of Bardia on 5 January 1941, Mussolini was persuaded by Ciano to request a meeting with Hitler with the ulterior motive of sponging some military aid off the Nazis. It took some doing, since according to his son-in-law, the competitive Duce tended to shy away from Hitler when Italian military fortunes were not going well in comparison to the highly publicized adventures of the Germans. Mussolini's public position was like that of a man who had attempted to show off by making a high dive into a swimming pool only to be seen floundering and sinking in the deep end. After he got over the initial

paralysis of embarrassment he allowed himself to be fussed by Ciano into making an approach for help to his fellow despot. The two dictators met at Hitler's Berghof residence in the Bavarian Alps near Berchtesgaden on 19 and 20 January 1941. Hitler impressed the Italian delegation with a show of loyalty and interest in Italian affairs. Amid the cold splendour of the mountain peaks, Hitler promised to send a German Panzer unit to Libya. Both Mussolini and his usually sceptical son-in-law descended from the frosty Bavarian heights filled with confidence. Tobruk promptly fell to the British afterwards on 22 January.

Ciano distrusted most of Italy's generals and urged Mussolini not to place too much confidence in them to avoid further humiliations. He felt that Italy's military was not up to par with managing the North African situation and Mussolini was not quite as worried as he should have been. 'At Sidi Barrani, they spoke of surprise. Then you counted upon Bardia, where [Annibale] Bergonzoli was, the heroic Bergonzoli. Bardia yielded after two hours', railed Ciano in a heated conversation with his father-in-law on 22 January. 'Then you placed your hope in Tobruk because Pitassi Mannella, the king of artillerymen, was there. Tobruk has also been easily wrested from us. Now you speak with great faith of the escarpment of Derna. I beg to differ with your dangerous illusions. The trouble is grave, mysterious and deep.' Both Mussolini and his son-in-law waited anxiously to see what help the Germans could give them.

Privately Hitler and members of his inner circle, particularly Goebbels, were acutely aware of a publicity problem. German propaganda had made much of their Axis alliance with Italy. While other European nations had feared Nazi Germany's rise, Italy had validated it. Lending each other public support in their political ambitions, Hitler and Mussolini had presented themselves as thick as thieves and inseparable. Now that the insecure Mussolini was trying to assert his wounded sense of machismo in light of Hitler's conquests, Hitler was starting to regret their closeness.

Both Goebbels and Hitler worried that Italy's failures were upstaging Germany's successes. Their concern was that the Germans were putting on a good show but the Italians were stealing their thunder with absurd antics in a backwards propaganda phenomenon not unlike modern

‘photobombing’. Venting in his diary after Italy’s failures in December 1940, Goebbels accused Italy of ‘unequalled amateurishness’. ‘The Italians have ruined the entire military prestige of the Axis’, he seethed. ‘The Italians were once Romans. But now we have to intervene. Not in order to help them, but just to drive the English away … Rome is incorrigible.’ He described Hitler as having made ‘very sharp remarks’ in the same vein.

The Upstart

The intrepid Erwin Rommel was intended to act as a bulwark of German support shipped fresh to Libya by Hitler to assuage a fretting Mussolini, almost as a type of human goodwill token – not to mention that sending a German to control the situation suited Hitler’s ulterior motives of preventing further Italian debacles from drawing the world’s eye. While he was at it, Hitler also managed to negotiate with the Italians for a Luftwaffe base near Tripoli, Libya – ideal for Germany to gain control over Mediterranean skies and seize an advantage in being able to attack enemy shipping.

Rommel was placed in command of a small German force initially called the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* (DAK), which at first consisted of the 5th Light Division and 15th Panzer Division. The German 5th Light Division included the 5th Panzer Regiment, which boasted eighty medium tanks (the reliable and speedy Panzer IIIs and Panzer IVs) and seventy light tanks. The 15th Panzer Division arrived months after the first troops in 1941. To this was added the strength of Italian infantry and armoured units, most notably the Italian 132nd Armoured Division known as the Ariete, to whose troops Rommel would form a special attachment. Although his forces would later be enlarged and undergo a series of transformations and new names as the *Panzergruppe Afrika*, the *Panzerarmee Afrika*, the *Deutsch-Italienische Panzerarmee* and eventually *Heeresgruppe Afrika*, it would forever become known to history by its simplest and most memorable title: the Afrika Korps.

After receiving his orders, Rommel was packed off on his journey overnight. He stopped first in Italy and then went on to Sicily before

crossing the Mediterranean and arriving in Tripoli on 12 February. He wrote to his wife that his head was ‘spinning’ from how quickly things were moving and that his belongings, fetched post-haste, were supposed to catch up with him as he started the job.

His early interactions with his superiors and Italian counterparts were somewhat testy. When Rommel arrived at Castel Benito airport on 12 February 1941, he was met there by an aide of General Enno von Rintelen, Germany’s military attaché to Italy, who swiftly informed him that Graziani – evidently having emerged from his Ptolemaic tomb in a huff – had abruptly given up his command and vacated the area, leaving only his chief of staff, General Italo Gariboldi, in charge and tasked with briefing Rommel on the situation. Gariboldi was a portly man with a plume of a white moustache who was 10 years older than the spry Rommel and far less imaginative. He had somehow ascended the ranks in a noiseless manner like a stolid turtle that rose from the bottom of a pond, making no ripples in his career of either fracases or distinguished achievements. Like his recently disgraced supervisor, Gariboldi was proud and highly sensitive to perceived insults. He may have taken it badly that his boss Graziani, who had quit and gone back to Rome two days previously, had been seemingly supplanted by a German. His working relationship with Rommel would be contentious and comparatively short-lived.

Rommel was already full of ideas by the time he was strolling around the dusty ruins of Leptis Magna in shiny black boots, clicking photos of the broken Roman pillars with his Leica camera in Gariboldi’s rather sour-faced company. The Italians were gloomy about their prospects and felt extremely vulnerable in the face of recent British successes – indeed people expected British tanks to sweep over the horizon and into the outskirts of Tripoli the very evening of Rommel’s arrival, many Italian officers had their bags already packed for evacuation to Rome, and Gariboldi was so cowed that he discouraged Rommel from even attempting to set up a line of defence in the desert at Sirte. Rommel’s fellow Germans, relatively nonchalant towards the Italians, were satisfied with the role of being policemen to ward off further incursions and taking no offensive actions. According to Rommel, ‘*Generaloberst* [Franz] Halder clarified to me in 1941 that the German

troops in North Africa were being placed into an already lost position by the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* [OKW] and had no other task but to delay the collapse of Italian resistance in Libya for as long as possible'. Halder, a dyed-in-the-wool Prussian aristocrat of the type who usually treated Rommel like a military peasant, insisted it would be impossible to supply German forces in the long term. But Rommel had already consulted his own maps and information, made his own assessments and heartily disagreed. For the hands-on Rommel, the best defence was offence. Since the First World War he had never been content with any type of inaction, which appeared to him as a symptom of laziness and made men into 'sitting ducks'. For Rommel, any kind of work required initiative.

Again he would have tanks at his disposal in addition to infantry. And this time, the desert offered him an arena of limitless possibilities to test his theories about manoeuvre and firepower. Here in the desert were problems to which he had already worked out several intriguing solutions that he was eager to demonstrate – and none of them involved being passive. He had dared to whisper a hint of his visions before leaving Rome. His confidant, Von Rintelen 'advised me against my intentions, since by doing so one could, as he put it, lose honour and reputation', Rommel later wrote. But Von Rintelen had not realized he was speaking to an abstractedly intelligent man who, since boyhood, had been easily carried away by his dreams and never let anything stand in the way.

Before long the sun of the Sahara Desert was shining upon Rommel, and so, it seemed at first, were the fortunes of war. He ordered airstrikes on Benghazi, recently fallen to the British, despite Italian reluctance to risk bombing the villas of their officers who lived there. He reconnoitred the desert by air, rallied Italian troops at Sirte and put them to work in creating a forward defensive position before the arrival of his German soldiers on 14 February. The Germans, decked out in smart tropical equipment and glowing with excitement at serving in such an exotic location, paraded proudly in Tripoli the next day. German tanks were offloaded from the harbour and the squeaky metallic rolling of Panzer IIIs and Panzer IVs on the move was heard in Tripoli for the first time. Rommel charted the desert, explored everywhere he could reach by aircraft or by vehicle, peered

through binoculars, took photos, measured and scribbled on maps, and calculated furiously. Before long he was presenting fresh plans to everyone he could, including Mussolini, and demanding emphatically to be let off his leash.

Both German and Italian officers recoiled at his ebullience. Not only was Rommel innovative to the point of frightening some people, but his can-do spirit came as a pinch of salt to men who had previously assumed the complications facing them were unsolvable or at least horribly difficult. Mussolini was also at times irritated by the fact that a German seemed able to blaze ahead with solutions to troubles while Italian generals appeared ineffective. When Rommel first offered to perform wonders, Mussolini had no reason not to accept his talents. Eventually Mussolini and even his snide son-in-law Ciano would come to respect Rommel as a commander who was both realistic and reliable, with Ciano writing in June 1942 that the Duce 'trusts only Rommel'.

Hitler, also, recognized Rommel as a publicity godsend for the flailing Axis alliance; here was a German who could lead Italians in battle to defeat a shared enemy, and what's more, this German wasn't an aristocratic cold fish but a comparatively young, friendly and photogenic fellow who mixed well with people and gave the German army a fresh look. With each promising move Rommel made, Hitler initially showed himself willing to step in on Rommel's behalf amid diplomatic disputes with recalcitrant officials in both Germany and Italy. Goebbels, seeking to cash in on Rommel's political value, steadily started singing his praises in propaganda designed to exalt the Third Reich and humiliate the enemy – incidentally increasing jealousy among Rommel's peers. On 22 February 1941, Goebbels recorded: 'General Rommel has … received full power of authority from Mussolini. Plus three Panzer divisions. Goal is the retaking of Benghazi. Because of the airbase.' This was only the beginning.

The Fox Seizes His Lair

When a massive wall of dust surged towards the sleepy outpost of El Agheila near the Libyan-Egyptian border on 24 March 1941, British troops

beholding the ominous spectacle were unsure of what was coming at them. It looked powerful enough to be a sandstorm. This unnatural force, seemingly conjured from nowhere, turned out to be an advancing line of German tanks. They were everywhere. There were so many of them that the skies filled up with hazy sand for miles in every direction. Onward they rolled, closer and closer, inexorable and seemingly infinite. The Germans were coming.

The attack couldn't have come at a worse time for British troops at El Agheila, whose shoddy defences were then overseen by Lieutenant General Philip Neame, who reported to General Archibald Wavell, Britain's Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East. Until this point Wavell had enjoyed an easy time of making life miserable for Mussolini's troops, which was not difficult to do due to their lack of training, cohesion and general understanding of why they had invaded Egypt in the first place.

Nobody on the British side of the Western Desert had been expecting anything of the kind to happen – indeed not even the spies could have foreseen it, since this German attack had come in contrast to standing orders from the German Army High Command. Wavell ordered Neame to pull his troops out and, if necessary, yield even Benghazi. Thus the British scrambled to clear out of El Agheila, beating a path further back into Egypt and retreating no less than 30 miles in one go. This was the first but definitely not the last time they would flee El Agheila in a mad scamper the troops ironically dubbed the 'Benghazi Handicap', 'Tobruk Derby', and 'the Annual Swan', among other epithets.

And with that, this wild and strange section of the desert – known as El Agheila to the British and Mersa el Brega to the Germans – fell into the hands of the man who would master its inhospitable landscape and wield its natural complexities like a sorcerer. This bewitching dune sea bordered by sea and plains of jagged rocky soil would become Rommel's hideout and his launch pad – a place he could count on to spin his fortunes in the right direction with some cunning whirls of wind, light and dust. To first capture the place, Rommel had his Panzers driving at full speed while spaced out across a 1,000-yard front, and gave orders for his men to raise as much dust as possible. Their manic driving created a monstrous illusion. This was but

one eerie technique Rommel would master and use against his enemies to great effect.

If there was one area where Rommel reigned supreme, it came to be this lonely spot at the entrance to Egypt. In January 1942, Rommel would once again use El Agheila as a stronghold to hurl British forces clear across the Western Desert in a repeat performance of what he achieved in early 1941. It would prove impossible for a succession of British generals to pry El Agheila from his grasp, and impossible to keep Axis forces from penetrating Egypt with the aim of reaching the Nile Delta.

Desert Miracles

While some men hated the wastelands and begrudgingly adapted to life among the dunes, Rommel was enchanted by the barren landscapes of the Sahara and fell in love with its wildness and freedom. This attachment he formed to the desert worked in his favour. Indeed in his early days at war, the desert seemed to bless him. Rommel possessed a dark gift for unpleasantly surprising people, and the forces of nature initially proved to be his ally in this regard. Sandstorms offered him chances to conceal his troops' movements, dust in the wind aided him in confusing his enemies, caves and cliffs presented themselves to him as convenient weapons caches, bunkers and gun positions. The more he admired the terrain, taking numerous photos and studying its intricacies, the more he learned to read and 'cooperate' with it. He made use of defiles in the landscape to create traps for enemy tanks and to plant mines and booby traps.

'In the desert everything remains free', wrote Rommel's chief of staff, *Generalleutnant* Fritz Bayerlein. 'There are no obstacles, no shielding areas, bodies of water or forests. Everything is open and incalculable. One must daily – indeed, hourly – change position and achieve anew his freedom of action. Everything is in motion. One must constantly be on guard, as one stands always one step away from capture or annihilation by a clever, observant or agile opponent.'

Strangest of all were the strokes of blind luck that seemed to reward Rommel. Lieutenant General Neame, the first British officer to beat a path

out of El Agheila on Wavell's orders, later ended up getting lost in the wilderness and driving straight into the clutches of Rommel's troops, who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Although Neame and his men heard the sound of foreign voices outside their vehicle, they failed to recognize the Germans until it was too late. This was but one of hundreds of times that British soldiers would find Rommel where they least expected him, and but one of the many 'lucky' occasions when fortune would play straight into Rommel's hands.

The Sahara was at first not only generous but merciful to Rommel. Although he himself sometimes became lost and was nearly captured or killed, he always was able to get away unscathed – due to some blind coincidence, having just enough time and distance available to escape, or the failure of his enemies to recognize him. Once Rommel mistook a British army field hospital for New Zealand troops for a German one and got down for a tour. He and his men were covered in dust and went unrecognized by their willing British Army 'guide', who apparently believed they were foreign auxiliaries. Rommel was able to make a quick getaway without being caught. Another time he became lost while driving a captured British armoured vehicle known as the 'Mammoth' and ended up behind enemy lines and surrounded by British troops. Nobody noticed. The dust on the vehicle concealed the German markings that had been painted on it, and Rommel vanished into thin air unharmed. On another occasion he was forced to ground his Fieseler Storch plane; a sand dune appeared that allowed him to cushion the plane's rough landing without being harmed and a German vehicle came out of nowhere just in time to rescue him from approaching British forces. Rommel's strange 'luck' in the wilderness did not go unnoticed, and for this reason he became known as 'the Desert Fox' to both his own troops and the enemy.

Yet the Sahara was a fickle ally. Indeed the desert seemingly began to withdraw its gifts from Rommel in mid-1942, once he had become overconfident and had made the cardinal mistake of trusting it and believing he had become its master.

Until then, the desert was an open canvas upon which Rommel was free to sketch – and he did, through the sands with the tread of his armoured

vehicles and all over maps with brightly coloured pencils. He basked in the hot weather and the harsh freedom he found in the wilderness. The esprit de corps among the German troops was high to begin with and their confidence buoyed when they met their new commander. Rommel was everywhere. He would converse with the men, eat out of ration tins with them, work alongside them to dig fortifications, and make them take pride in their work. The troops, whom he affectionately called 'my Africans', learned to thrive under Rommel's tough command and developed a sense of identity as an elite unit.

While it was easy for Rommel to form a close bond with his fellow Germans, his Italian troops were more difficult to win over. The Italian troops suffered from poor morale and outdated equipment, and many of the men initially felt like second-class citizens compared to German troops. Although he wrote openly of his disdain for Italian officers, whom he believed were pampered and out of touch, Rommel had sincere affection for ordinary Italian soldiers. He particularly loved his Bersaglieri troopers, the elite of the Italian army who wore black plumes in their helmets, whom he photographed frequently. Rommel had once fought against Bersaglieri during the First World War. Now he commanded them with pride. Rommel spent a great deal of time with his Italian troops, particularly in training and drilling them, and was successful in forging a bond with many – if not all – of his Italian units. He grew particularly fond of the 132nd Armoured Division, the Ariete. Fiercely loyal to Rommel and comparatively well-integrated with the German troops, this division had a tragic destiny. It was later totally annihilated by Rommel's fiercest enemy, Montgomery, while Rommel literally heard its last devoted gasp over the radio. It would be one of many experiences at Montgomery's hands that Rommel would never forgive.

The Successes of General 'X'

The British had become complacent after a long period of successfully chasing the demoralized Italians around in the dunes. Commanders overestimated their own abilities and felt secure in their strength. British

intelligence had been aware already that a new German general's boots were to be expected on the ground in North Africa, but prior to 8 March 1941, this unknown factor was known only to the British as 'General X'. In Tripoli their informants had gotten a closer look at this 'General X', who had turned out to be a seemingly inconspicuous officer called Erwin Rommel. His troops and apparent wealth of Panzers made a sharp impression; indeed, unbeknownst to British intelligence, Rommel was canny enough to anticipate their close scrutiny and exaggerated his strength accordingly. He instructed his tanks to drive around the streets of Tripoli in a circle to inflate estimates of his strength and ordered the creation of 'dummy tanks', constructed of cardboard and multiplied to division strength, to be parked in places where enemy reconnaissance would unfailingly spot them.

Although they overestimated his forces, the British underestimated the personality of this new character. He had no fearsome Nazi past to be found in press reports – Goebbels would manufacture that later – and by all outward appearances he seemed intended to shepherd a police-type force to stabilize Italian Libya. They expected this German to follow his orders. The British had no idea who they were dealing with, and a quartet of British generals would prove unable to learn fast enough.

Four British commanders stood against Rommel from early 1941 to August 1942: Wavell, General Claude Auchinleck, Lieutenant General Alan Cunningham and Major General Neil Ritchie. Their inability to inflict a decisive defeat on him would see Rommel continuously thwart, bamboozle and above all outmanoeuvre them, flinging British troops pell-mell across the desert and driving them ever increasingly back towards Cairo. Each of these commanders tried to place boundaries on what Rommel would do based not on his personality, but largely upon intelligence gained through Ultra cryptography intercepts and his supply situation. They attempted to remain nonchalant and assured themselves they had nothing serious to worry about – until situations inevitably arose that caused worry, not least to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Of the four generals destined to be knocked out by Rommel, Auchinleck has elicited the most sympathy in post-war literature. Legends hold that

things in North Africa were going brilliantly, or at least not so badly, and that far from being in a state of losing against Rommel, a Merlin-esque Auchinleck had actually concocted a secret master plan to defeat Rommel at El Alamein when he was ruthlessly booted out of his post by a fiendish Churchill – the master plan, of course, which could arguably have saved his job had it existed, conveniently being a secret and later discovered and used by Montgomery against Rommel like a type of magic potion. These legends are not in touch with reality. Apart from the fact that Montgomery was too controlling to use anybody else's plans and also Rommel was too creative to be defeated by a one-size-fits-all formula devised by a man incapable of beating him, Auchinleck was indecisive and out of touch. Although he sometimes impressed people with his refined manners, Auchinleck had no firm grip on either the military situation or the troops under his command, many of whom were drawn from diverse regions of the British Empire. Auchinleck epitomized a type of blasé 'keep calm and carry on' approach that caused a *laissez faire* attitude to filter down through the ranks when, instead of just stoically 'carrying on', the men instead should have been fit and raring to fight. These factors would later cause Field Marshal Alan Brooke, Britain's Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), to lose faith in him and seek to remove the Eighth Army from his command.

At first dismissing Rommel as a pest who would eventually die on the desert's harsh vine due to shrinking supplies, Auchinleck consistently underestimated his opponent's resilience. In the face of surprise and setback, he was prepared to compromise with Rommel when the game changed. Worst of all, Auchinleck essentially attempted to manage the campaign remotely. Like the lofty leader of a corporation who doesn't particularly want to know what his managers are doing, Auchinleck gave hazy directives and expected his subordinates to deal with things and do most of the 'work' of fighting. His subordinates handled the ground troops ineptly and without a clear understanding of their overall objective. His actions during the First Battle of El Alamein in July 1942 were clumsy and ineffective as he failed to defeat Rommel and only managed to pull off a stalemate. Rommel saw the draw as only a temporary setback and had high hopes and confidence in his ability to make future gains.

The British troops themselves, through no fault of their own, were reduced to a truly sorry spectacle. Fine fighting men from regiments with proud lineages and nations across the British Empire had become such a dusty and bedraggled lot that they resembled an army of hobos rather than soldiers. They were grimy, deprived and utterly demoralized. Unwashed and unshaved for untold months on end, they walked around in ragged clothes or various states of undress with dishevelled hair sticking up in all directions and their faces and bodies caked with sand, as photographs from this early period demonstrate. They reused old tea bags for months, drank saltwater, ate bad food in filthy conditions and had gotten used to living with swarms of flies; although the flies were typical of the desert, these pests had become the boon companions of the men of the Eighth Army, who had largely given up trying to avoid or repel them. The men feebly attempted to cover their faces to prevent thirsty flies from biting at their eye moisture and saliva but were otherwise accustomed to letting hundreds of flies crawl all over them. Naturally many men were sick due to poor hygiene. During the day they roasted in the sun under scanty tent coverings or in holes in the ground, and froze at night. The Eighth Army looked like it had been wandering through the desert for a Biblical 40 years rather than fighting a war.

The men's spirits were shattered. They had no idea what higher commanders thought they were doing or what the point of it all was. They saw themselves as footballs being kicked back and forth across the desert for miles. Their friends died fighting for strips of sand and towns which were inevitably lost or given up again. With irrepressible British spirit they kept on and made jokes about the incongruity of it all, but beneath their plucky veneer, they knew the situation was far from funny.

Many men were angry, depressed – and actually afraid. They knew only one person who was in charge here: Rommel, their enemy. It was his will to whom they bent, his tanks who chased them, his guns who blasted their own tanks into burning torches and smashed their friends to smithereens, who reduced the warmth and laughter of their comrades to nothing but empty wind and blood in the sand. Nobody could tell what Rommel would

do next, but he was there – everywhere, anywhere, in this wicked wilderness – and he was out to get them. There was no stopping him.

The men looked to their leaders not only for clear directions in battle, which were lacking, but for some relief from this relentless desert ghost who oppressed them. None was forthcoming. They watched their generals crumble in defeat one by one at Rommel's hands. Even when he seemed nearly done for, Rommel was always able to rebound, sowing death, confusion and emergency in his wake. No hope seemed to await them. British troops were conditioned to accept defeat. Rommel was the master of this merciless arena they were doomed to fight in and their actions seemed to depend on his whims alone.

Auchinleck did nothing to address this thoroughly messy state of affairs, which had snowballed to its nadir by the time he took command. It was of little consequence to him how the men were faring personally as long as they performed – uncomprehendingly – tasks expected of them. He was inept at handling crisis situations with a firm grip, taking hands-on control of matters, or caring about the obvious human details that have proved critical to the success of armies in battle throughout history. Essentially Auchinleck lacked initiative. Instead, like his predecessors, he made assumptions about Rommel's actions and capabilities based on abstract factors such as supplies and intelligence reports, such as casualty estimates and insights on German army orders to Rommel. This was ignoring the fact that Rommel far outclassed other commanders in imagination and sheer spunk. To expect Rommel to behave according to orders and predictable norms when he had consistently been doing the opposite wasn't simply unrealistic; it was negligent.

For a year and a half, each successive British commander attempted various approaches to hold Rommel in check. None among them were prepared for Rommel to succeed against them, to self-sustain his efforts for long, or to penetrate very far into Egypt, and thus they overreacted when he did all of those things. They yanked their troops away from his grasp and then swung forward in various directions in vain attempts to swat him away. In doing so, they played straight into Rommel's hands in a backwards-and-forwards Western Desert waltz in which Rommel proved the dominant

partner, luring them out, turning them in different directions, sweeping ever onward and pressing the back of what would be named the British Eighth Army steadily up against the wall of Cairo. As plan after plan went awry, all came to depend on Rommel's actions, and everyone danced to Rommel's tune.

With His Face Towards the Pyramids

After arriving in 1941, Rommel had rampaged across Libya and steadily butted his way into Egypt. When confronted with enemy manoeuvres, he made temporary withdrawals before rallying and returning. He took and retook numerous cities along the North African coastline, such as Sollum, Bardia, Fort Capuzzo and Mersa Matruh. He was thwarted by the British garrison at Tobruk, Libya in 1941 before returning and conquering it at last in June 1942, smashing Allied forces at Bir Hacheim and Gazala in the process. No decisive defeat was ever inflicted upon him and through his sheer ability to manoeuvre – to either avoid, outflank, or encircle and smash opponents by artfully weaving his forces around – he retained his staying power. Egypt was his goal, and it proved impossible to eject him from it. Following a string of much-publicized military victories, 49-year-old Rommel was promoted by Hitler to the rank of Field Marshal following his triumph at Tobruk. Immensely proud of this new rank, Rommel urged his troops onward to finish the enemy off. 'Now for the complete destruction of the enemy. We will not rest until we have shattered the last remnants of the British Eighth Army', he wrote in an Order of the Day to his troops on 21 June 1942.

Italian intelligence operatives had been intercepting American transmissions from US Army Major Bonner Fellers, a military attaché at the American embassy in Cairo. The Germans as well as the Italians regularly obtained copies of what Fellers transmitted to Washington DC. In another oversimplification of the desert war, it has been claimed that Fellers' intelligence leaks were the bedrock of Rommel's early victories. In reality these were, as all intelligence reports are and have been to military commanders since ancient times, a tool that Rommel evaluated and made

use of at will as he freely shaped his campaigns. Although the intelligence leaks did unquestionable damage, in and of themselves they do not detract from the tactical genius Rommel displayed in the field.

By August 1942, Rommel had warded off a defeat at the First Battle of Alamein and was parked contentedly 60 miles west of Alexandria. In mid-1942, Italian officials heard from Fellers – with joy – that the US had a dim view of the ability of the British to hold the city or indeed Egypt at all. Fellers believed Rommel was within striking distance of the Suez Canal. So did everybody else. The inhabitants of Cairo, particularly British expatriates, officials and others who didn't wish to be conquered by Rommel, started packing their bags and evacuating. There was a run on shops and supplies started flying off of shelves. Enterprising Cairo merchants started hawking luggage and toiletries to capitalize off public desperation. Some British officials in the city braced themselves for Rommel's arrival, making plans for how they would handle it when he appeared and how they might receive him.

Despite being an improviser, Rommel had far-reaching vision and there was in fact a method behind what others saw as madness. Shortly after his arrival in North Africa he had analyzed how he might speedily swing across the poorly defended Western Desert and grab the Suez Canal, thereby striking a very efficient nail in the coffin of the British Empire and crippling enemy supplies. This would also gain the Germans access to Middle Eastern oil, which could then be used to further campaigns in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Rommel knew the importance of oil – his tanks and vehicles were dependent on it, and in North Africa he was compelled to operate in short supply of it due to British successes at sinking supplies in the Mediterranean sent to him from Italy. The lack of supplies, particularly fuel, became an enormous problem for Rommel as time went on. Yet despite his difficulties, the Desert Fox and his inventive Afrika Korps persisted. Under Rommel's direction, German soldiers set up workshops and learned to repair damaged tanks, vehicles, firearms and other equipment on the go and at record speed. They rationed fuel and were able to stretch their supplies with a thriftiness and efficiency that had a distinctly Swabian touch.

Rommel had invented not only an independent but a self-sufficient, guerilla-like force that had mastered living and fighting ‘off the grid’. This ingenuity allowed Rommel and his troops to keep operating even when it seemed impossible.

Rommel had literally drawn up plans for an invasion of Cairo. He had sketched the city on paper and visualized capturing it. His plan would involve cooperation from Egyptian nationalist agents within the city, whose anti-British sentiments would spur them to cooperate with the Germans. The Egyptians would blow up the Nile bridges and start an armed insurrection against British troops. The chaos would be an advantage for Rommel and help him take the city with relative ease; his goal was to vanquish the British without causing any unnecessary harm to the local Egyptians, his intended allies. His supply shortage had hampered his advance and the options available to him for pressing on with his conquest, but he was doing everything in his power to rectify this situation. He was only waiting for a breakthrough to allow him to proceed.

But Rommel had become overconfident. Despite his supply difficulties, he was still convinced he could succeed in his goals if only material factors went in his favour. He had lost his fear of – indeed his respect for – the ally that had brought him this far: the desert, with its storms, dunes, winds, mirages and bizarre twists of fortune that had furthered his aims against all human odds, to the worship of his troops and the bafflement of his enemies. He no longer thought he needed the desert that had beguiled him and whose mysteries he had once loved. Instead his eyes were fixed on Cairo. He assumed he could ‘handle’ the desert long enough to get there. Instead of a living force to be reckoned with, the desert was now the simple means to an end. He dared to take it for granted and presume he could cross its remaining distance easily with his ingenuity and military materiel alone.

From this point onwards, Rommel’s fortunes would change. His health would begin to fail him in the dust and heat. His fuel would not get him as far as he hoped. Tanks and vehicles that had once been easy for his troops to repair were no longer salvageable. Distances which he had assumed he could get across without too much trouble now eluded his grasp for various reasons.

Whether by its natural harshness or some intangible primordial power, the desert had a way of ripping away men's grand ambitions and confronting them with the bare essence of what they truly were, exposing their human frailty. It humiliated those who disregarded its savage majesty. Now, Rommel too would realize how fragile he and his men truly were in the wilderness. Rommel's success would start to unravel before his eyes in mid-1942 in a humiliating spectacle that would see him painfully lose, step by step, all the territory across the Sahara he had so easily gained.

Let the Games End

The North African campaign was fairly enjoyable for Rommel until mid-1942. It had its ups and downs – capturing the Libyan city of Tobruk, for example, from its stubborn Australian defenders had been somewhat exhausting – but by and large the newly crowned Field Marshal was in his element. North Africa would prove to be the pinnacle of what he achieved during this war – the place where his mind remained, the place he would harp about to subordinates later on in 1944 when they were fairly well sick of hearing about his faded desert glories. He had taken hundreds of photographs during his Saharan apotheosis and was already scribbling notes for his next book.

In his calm, affable way, he valued the first four British commanders he had beaten. He had thoroughly enjoyed bewildering them and having a good scramble out in the dunes, as much as one might have enjoyed an invigorating game of tennis or even poker. Rommel's satisfaction about these victories was akin to what a professor of chemistry or physics would feel after having amazed students with a startling scientific demonstration. Everything was a mental exercise for the mathematician Rommel. He liked to teach his opponents 'lessons'. A gregarious creature, he was interested in others' reactions to his moves – war as a type of conversation.

Rommel developed the somewhat bizarre habit of 'marking' the learning abilities of his enemies, as though he were a teacher remarking on the 'progress' of his students in grasping his methods and lessons. Needless to say, none of the generals had gone to the desert to learn from Rommel,

but he was conceited enough – and scientific enough – to assess their 'learning abilities' in such a manner. Naturally he was fond of the first four, because he had beaten all of them and presumed he had 'taught' them something. Rommel classed the unlucky quartet of failed British commanders as belonging to a cautious 'old school' type – simply put, as doddering fuddy-duddies who were a bit old for games but nevertheless fun to play with. While he was complimentary of men who had been fairly mild-mannered and non-threatening, he would be far less generous to one merciless opponent who would bring his dreams of Egyptian conquest to an inglorious end and totally vanquish him. Rommel would learn to loathe this new character, to the point of being unwilling to credit him with an original victory and attempting to undercut his accomplishments in writings. This was merely Rommel being unable to admit that this man actually fairly beat him.

This newcomer was a fierce and bristling creature the likes of whom Rommel had never before encountered. He was unwilling to be taught by Rommel or approach warfare as an exercise of imagination. For this ruthlessly competitive man, battle was a quest of domination. He lived to fight just for the thrill of it and found trouncing his opponents personally satisfying. In times of peace he was studying war and in times of war he was relentlessly battling. As a commander, he studied his opponents and plotted their demises with shark-like vigour at all hours apart from the few he set apart for eating and sleeping. He also knew the desert, having been previously garrisoned in Egypt and fought in the Middle East before. While not enchanted by the wastelands as Rommel was, he knew the Sahara was nothing to be trifled with – and that sense of respect, combined with natural grit and experience, made him prepared and well-suited for desert warfare. He was willing to live among the troops in the dunes, to roast in the sun until he turned brown and bear the lashings of dust storms until he had killed and utterly demolished all German-Italian forces who had dared to plant intrusive feet on Britain's Middle Eastern doorstep. An inveterate brawler, he was cheerfully looking forward to knocking Rommel's teeth out.

This hellion was Lieutenant General Bernard Law Montgomery, who arrived in Egypt in August 1942 with the task of protecting what assets the British had left. Rommel's triumphs had not only cost the British territory but had humiliated them in the eyes of the world. This fight was about more than military gains – it was about international prestige and perceptions of global power, now more so than ever. Leaders in London hoped that somehow the pugnacious Montgomery could succeed where others had failed in putting a stop to the forays of Rommel, who like some eerie desert organism had managed to survive with scant resources and continuously adapted to cause harm to anything in reach. Their trust in Montgomery would pay dividends. From this point onwards, there would be no more lessons and no more games. Monty was a lone wolf and he was out for Rommel's blood.

CHAPTER 4

THE SWASHBUCKLER

‘More skilful in self-knowledge, even more pure,
As tempted more; more able to endure,
As more exposed to suffering and distress;
Thence, also, more alive to tenderness.’

William Wordsworth,
Character of the Happy Warrior

On 17 November 1887, a boy was born in London, England who would change the course of world history as a commander in the Second World War’s most pivotal battles. Bernard Law Montgomery would rise from misfortune and obscurity to gain the honour of the first great victory of the war at the Second Battle of El Alamein, which pitted him against Erwin Rommel in North Africa. He would not be hailed by a mysterious nickname like his German opponent ‘the Desert Fox’, but instead simply as ‘Monty’. When he was eventually made a Viscount, he would choose ‘Viscount of Alamein’ as his title to mark his consequential desert victory, accomplished

entirely by his own skill and initiative and without the interference of high-level military rivals that he later experienced.

Monty came into the world at the vicarage of St. Mark's Parish in Kennington, South London. While this religious environment might seem like an odd birthplace for a future Field Marshal, there are some hints of destiny below its surface. The church itself was one of four 'Waterloo churches' built in London to commemorate the British victory over the menace of Napoleon Bonaparte. The church's namesake, St. Mark the Evangelist, is known for his ties to Egypt and, in some Christian traditions, for his gospel's blunt and forthright writing style aimed at militaristic Roman readers; the saint is symbolized by a lion.

Monty's parents were extremely religious. His father Henry Hutchinson Montgomery was a Church of Ireland minister who would go on to become a bishop – he would in fact become Bishop of Tasmania and move the whole family to Australia, where Monty would grow up. His mother Maud, nee Farrar, was the proud daughter of a formidable character – Frederick Farrar, Archdeacon of Westminster and later Dean of Canterbury. This grandfather would cast a long shadow over Monty's early life.

Montgomery's heritage was English and Northern Irish, or Ulster Scots. The people of Ulster are known for their straightforward manner and by living their lives firmly according to their inner convictions. They are strong, passionate and great-hearted people who cannot be forced to budge from their principles nor allow themselves to be oppressed in any manner. However, they are also known for their intense loyalty which, once it is earned, can never be shaken. This spirit makes them magnificent warriors, with the consequence that Northern Ireland has given many great fighters to history. In addition to Bernard Montgomery, SAS hero Robert Blair 'Paddy' Mayne and Field Marshal Alan Brooke were Ulstermen who served Britain with distinction during the Second World War, and like Monty were also known for their fearlessness and courage.

The Montgomery family hailed from the remote and scenic peninsula of Inishowen in Donegal on the tip of Northern Ireland, where their Scottish ancestors had settled as part of the Plantation of Ulster. The family owned land and a home there; this was not a very stately home but more like a

simple residence sited on a rugged outpost. Montgomery ancestors helped to settle and develop the local community over time. The area was and remains a wild and beautiful place. Monty was attached to the locale, once referring to it as ‘my dear old Irish home’. Monty always identified very strongly with his father’s side of the family and with his Irish roots, which were important to him.

Monty spent the formative years of his life in Tasmania, where he enjoyed swimming and being outdoors. This Australian upbringing likely contributed to his spirit of independence. Had he been in England, Montgomery would likely have spent his early childhood in boarding schools which was customary at the time. Socializing children in boarding schools trains them according to certain norms and behaviour. Monty did not grow up within this system. He was an adolescent by the time his family moved back to England. When he and his brother attended St. Paul’s School afterwards, he wrote that they were initially treated as ‘colonials’ – in other words, as unsophisticated backwater aliens.

Monty was quick to adapt. However, he never lost his free-spirited and forthright manner. He remained largely unconcerned with social conventions, had a raffish sense of humour, peppered his speech with jaunty slang, marched to his own tune and was totally unafraid of speaking his mind. In England, Montgomery’s deportment sometimes raised hackles as well as eyebrows, particularly as he rose in rank and responsibility during the Second World War and came into increasing contact with members of the gentry who held high political and military offices. In Australia, he might not have experienced this cultural and social class friction.

Personality, Strengths and Weaknesses

Bernard Montgomery was a bright, energetic and mischievous little boy who grew incorrigibly into a rowdy and rascally young man. He had refined features, light blue eyes, a Roman nose, and straight brown hair. After becoming a British Army officer he made some changes to his appearance; he experimented with various styles of moustaches, trying out a few imposing versions over the years before settling on a bristle of impressively

short and neat whiskers. This incarnation of his moustache characterized his appearance during the Second World War and for the rest of his life afterwards. He also got tattoos. Although he often wore long sleeves, several tattoos were visible on both of his arms in many photos, including one of the antelope crest of his regiment, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

In physique, Monty was short, lean and wiry. He was so slim that he appeared to weigh as much as a feather and not be very intimidating. Appearances in this case were deceptive. Monty's slender build belied great strength and speed to say nothing of his fierce disposition; as a young man playing rugby he had a habit of levelling people who got too close to him, and sometimes pulled other players' hair. A born athlete, he played every sport he could and took pride in his physical fitness.

Montgomery was a confident, passionate and high-spirited man. Contrary to how he has been portrayed, he was not timid in any way. He was a swashbuckler. Despite his small stature he projected a great presence. He swaggered and cultivated a dashing appearance, wearing various military hats, caps, jackets and scarves with flair. He was vain, sometimes flouting military dress regulations for the sake of style. He was robust and thrived being physically active. He had an aggressive nature and was highly competitive. He liked contests – squaring off against and especially beating opponents, whether at sports, bets or in battles. He always intended to win.

He was also quite bossy and could be very controlling. Monty used his dominating streak for good purposes. Ever seeking to improve himself as a soldier, he developed an extraordinary level of self-discipline. His self-mastery was such that he could unflinchingly overcome challenges and hardships. A particularly impressive example was his behaviour following a 1945 plane crash which left Monty badly hurt. Despite suffering spinal fractures, he immediately went to decorate his Canadian troops without complaining or showing pain. He was meticulous and made sure that his family members as well as his troops were provided for in every possible way, with no detail left unconsidered.

Despite his tendency toward spartan self-control, Monty was not prudish or uptight in his attitudes or beliefs. In fact he was very open-

minded. He has been portrayed as a religious zealot because he refused to smoke or drink. Monty believed he needed to strictly self-discipline himself in order to exercise perfect control over his troops, particularly during war. However he was not dogmatically religious. Although raised in an ecclesiastical family, Monty rejected hardcore Christianity. He wrote that he did not see a need for a religious foundation for some time in his life. He developed a private and independent faith over time. He had nothing against cigarettes but was prevented from inhaling excess cigarette smoke due to a gunshot wound he sustained through his lung. He had a liberal attitude towards casual sex, distributed condoms to his men and set up medically evaluated brothels for his troops in India and Egypt so they could meet their sexual needs in a healthy manner. His approach, both wise and practical as to be ahead of his time, provoked an outcry from church authorities who accused him of immorality, which he remained unrepentant of. He swore, took bets and was very much a soldier's soldier.

Monty had a zesty sense of humour. He liked to hear and tell irreverent jokes, was fond of sharing funny stories and enjoyed making people laugh. He fiercely relished fighting, was fascinated by everything related to war, battles and military history, and was always ready for a scrap. Certain members of society did not find his demeanour amusing; his cavalier remarks about the potential Western use of an atom bomb later outraged some members of Parliament after the Second World War. Monty realized he had a special knack for offending people and embraced it. 'I understand there are people who often think I am slightly mad; so often that I now regard it as rather a compliment', he impudently told the troops of the Eighth Army when he took command in Egypt in 1942.

For all his swagger, Montgomery was not a lout. He was a gifted communicator who was good at working with people from different cultures and managing staff. He had a well-developed worldview and a great deal of global experience as he had served – and fought – in diverse locations around the world. He spoke several different languages including French and Hindustani. He was a talented writer and public speaker. He was very well-read, and in addition to his military studies enjoyed poetry, music, literature and going to the theatre. He had a deep sense of fairness that made

him willing to understand other people's viewpoints. He was professional and polite in his dealings with certain American generals during the Second World War who behaved much less professionally towards him. He was good at organizing others to work towards mutual goals. Because of his intellect and organizational powers, Montgomery has often been typecast as an inhibited backroom general who was more of a clerk than a 'fighting general'. This couldn't be further from the truth.

Monty was no saint. For all his self-control, he could be moody and sharp with others. He was hot-tempered and could be extremely sarcastic. Alternatively there were times when he could be quite cold and calculating in his dealings with others. His strategic powers meant that he tended to think two steps ahead of most people. This helped him in battles and in cases of diplomacy and management, but his foxy streak could at times be mercenary, such as when he made his initial approach to his eventual wife, Betty. Yet he was not a selfish or egocentric person; he had a conscience and was more than capable of modesty and remorse. Indeed Montgomery was prone to finding fault with himself and tended to underrate his own character and accomplishments in his speeches and writings. In contrast to how he is perceived, Montgomery was the least self-centred and probably the humblest of all the Allied generals of the Second World War – which is part of the reason why his reputation has suffered so much over the years since.

Montgomery was a genuinely good and warm-hearted man. His compassion, fair-mindedness and care for others were a result of deliberate choices – a direct consequence of not having been treated with kindness, tolerance or empathy himself. The type of leader he became owed in large part to hardships and sufferings he experienced in his youth. As he matured, he would bravely and diligently choose to become the opposite of what he had experienced.

A Stormy Childhood

Monty famously drew attention to his unhappy childhood in his memoirs, which has attracted the focus – and denigration – of spectators ever since.

Members of his family were quick to sweep the scrutiny under the carpet, vouch that everything was more or less just fine and throw blame on Monty himself for being a supposedly difficult person. Other writers have gone with this trend and cast Monty's parents – especially his mother – as old-fashioned but generally well-meaning. Montgomery himself has been alternately patronized or criticized for speaking out against his family and upbringing.

Montgomery had courage in being honest about what he experienced and in showing willingness to discuss the negative effects it had on him. He took a very modern approach. At the time when he published his memoirs, it was unfashionable to openly discuss difficult childhoods or disclose problems; the vast majority of public figures chose to conceal pain or difficulties. Montgomery, in keeping with his frank disposition, was brave in being honest and speaking his truth.

Contrary to common myths, Montgomery was not actually a difficult or unbearable person, nor was he given to complaining. In fact, he possessed a quiet sense of dignity. He was no doubt assertive, as all military leaders are and have to be. However he was a highly self-disciplined man and showed much restraint and professionalism in his behaviour throughout his life. There were many occasions, especially during the Second World War, in which he would have been perfectly entitled to give vent to upset feelings in no uncertain terms yet chose not to do so. Although he was clear and resolute in voicing his opinions and convictions, he can never be accused of being uncontrolled, emotionally unstable, vulgar or boorish – as some other notable Second World War generals fairly could be. As a testament to his unwillingness to complain, Montgomery tended to avoid speaking about or writing about things that were personally difficult for him. The absences of what he discusses in his writings are very telling. He does not, for example, describe the horrors of what he witnessed and endured in the First World War although he hints at it a few times; he was present at Belsen concentration camp but mentioned it only briefly, albeit emotionally. The deaths of certain comrades and his reactions to those losses were omitted from his writings, as was his courtship of a girl he hoped to marry which ended in rejection. He also avoids describing his interactions with US Army

General George Patton, who was infamously rude to him. These are only a few upsetting things that Monty did not write about, and tactfully avoided discussing. But Monty was honest. When disclosing unpleasant experiences was unavoidable, he did so in a restrained but candid – and very controlled – manner. That said, it is wrong to dismiss his claims about his childhood experiences as the product of a bad personality or exaggeration. Montgomery did not have a bad personality nor was he prone to exaggerate.

Montgomery's difficult childhood owed chiefly to his mother, Maud. He disclosed that his mother beat him severely. This was done for reasons that he at times found unclear. His mother often told his siblings to seek him out with the words: 'Whatever Bernard is doing, tell him to stop it'. The severity with which his mother treated him caused Monty to cut ties with her and never forgive her. He was very frank about wanting nothing to do with her, particularly after he became famous for his Second World War achievements – a period in time when Maud was more than happy to bask in her son's celebrity. Like other famous people who are suddenly confronted with a neglectful or hurtful parent suddenly wanting to share their spotlight, Monty cut her off. He was criticized for that. A closer look at Monty's experiences shows he was completely justified in doing so – and in fact, that he was actually very restrained in describing what he experienced. What he endured as a child was worse than most people think.

Popular memory has tended to evaluate Maud as if she existed in her own vacuum and was merely a humble churchman's wife trying to do her best to raise children. She was a young mother, so the refrain goes, overwhelmed by her responsibilities and the fact that the family was poor, and so occasional spankings were the only thing she knew how to do. That was the narrative pushed by some of Montgomery's relatives. Reality suggests something darker. A closer look at the experiences Monty described and at Maud's family background suggests that these were more than just a few odd spankings. In reality, Monty experienced severe child abuse and neglect.

Maud's troublesome behaviour can be traced to the example of her own father, the clergyman Frederic Farrar. To describe Farrar as rigid in his approach to religion would be an understatement. His views about Christian

morality were extreme. He had worked as a teacher and headmaster at all-boys' public schools – Harrow School and Marlborough College, respectively – and was obsessed with indoctrinating boys at the end of a cane. According to Farrar's views, which he wrote about in a fictional novel called *Eric – Or Little By Little*, sins and temptations lurked everywhere. In fact behaviours that Farrar claimed were abominable were actually quite tame and normal for young boys. (In one instance in his book, Farrar rants about the wickedness of boys whose terrible crime amounts to nothing more than whispering and joking in a church; Farrar paints the scene, as he does most ordinary behaviours, in apocalyptic hues.) This strange and melodramatic tale tells the story of a character named Eric coming to woe and literally dying as a result of becoming 'corrupted' by all kinds of little behaviours – hence the title, *Little by Little*.

The book is astonishing in the extreme nature of Farrar's expressed beliefs. Farrar claimed that no behaviour was insignificant. Everything was in fact a vital matter of salvation or doom, according to him. Ideal boys, in his world, were cherubic little creatures who were models of meekness and should be raised to become mild and soft-mannered young men. His ideal young men were unassertive and 'untainted' by the world; he despised aggressive behaviour and indeed most behaviours that one would consider ordinary byproducts of adolescence and testosterone. His solution to forming what he viewed as an ideal man was to beat up – indeed physically break – a boy when he was young. Farrar claimed that boys needed to be saved from 'sins' and 'moral temptations' of many different (and intangible) varieties by having the living daylights beaten out of them by 'wiser' adults. According to Farrar, temptation needed to be nipped in the bud by an obliging torturer before it became an actual sin. This theory of course gave great leeway to anyone with the means, opportunity and social power to wield a cane. Any boy could be – and according to Farrar, deserved to be – flogged for whatever reason a supposedly wise and morally superior adult deemed necessary. From a child's perspective, the power imbalance as well as the sudden and unpredictable nature of this type of violence would have been terrifying – as would the brutal degree of the violence itself.

Farrar describes several graphic scenes of caning, which are extraordinary for their masochistic descriptions of boys suffering and writhing. Judging by the vividness of these descriptions, Farrar was familiar with savagely beating children and had acquired some practice at it. One scene describes an adult male teacher, cast as a protagonist in the story, becoming physically exhausted as he unrestrainedly canes his pupils after they collapse from his blows and are screaming and rolling on the floor. The teacher continues beating them with all his strength even after he draws blood and only ceases his activity after he has forced the boys' total physical submission. Perversely, Farrar praises his depiction of brutish violence as a virtuous and wholesome experience for both victims and assailant. His writing also includes cloying descriptions of the naughty boys which add a rather sinister touch to this novel, which became famous for its supposed religious significance. Farrar's assertions that inflicting such extreme violence on children was beneficial for them suggests that he was motivated by an abusive disposition.

Farrar passed on his abusive patterns of behaviour to his daughter Maud, who became a mirror image of him as a married woman. Maud has been described as a haughty and overbearing person who ruled her household with an iron fist. This was in marked contrast to her husband, Henry, who was by all accounts a rather mild soul whose religious beliefs were more open and lenient.

Monty wrote that he had a deep love for his father, and this attachment is reflected in many aspects of Monty's life, including in a picture of Henry he selected as an illustration for his memoirs. The photo is not a religious one nor even a formal portrait, but a simple picture of Henry Montgomery wearing outdoor clothes and holding a walking stick. This unusual image stands in the book as a lasting testament to Monty's fond memories of him. Additionally, Monty kept a painting of his father at home; obviously he liked to be reminded of him. Monty barely touched upon the death of his father in his memoirs and this absence of detail is a sign that the loss was particularly difficult for him, as it falls into Monty's pattern of avoiding to write about upsetting things. Despite the natural affection between them, father and son had little in common apart from a physical resemblance.

Henry was hopelessly preoccupied with his religious beliefs, clerical career and duties as a bishop. Monty cared little about religion and felt alienated. In any case, he had no parent to lean on for emotional support. According to Monty, his father 'took no part' in the raising of his family. This left Monty at the mercy of Maud while he was growing up in Australia.

Monty was a lively little boy who was curious and playful; he inevitably explored and got into things. He also admitted that he wanted affection from his mother. Sadly, any form of mischief or activity would earn him a merciless beating. Monty recalled that his mother frequently beat him with a cane. The beatings were frequent and unpredictable. He associated his mother with violence and was terrified of her. Maud was replicating her father's approach to caning boys. It happened constantly. Monty had a strong personality and did not want to submit to his mother's control. Farrar's ideal boys were quiet and submissive. Monty was strong and irrepressible. He did not want to be smothered and would not back down. When his mother responded with more violence, Monty became emotionally hardened and resentful of authority. This can happen to a person forced to endure torture.

Few people have paused to consider the physical effect that this violence would have had on a young child. These beatings would have ruptured blood vessels under the skin and left moderate to severe bruises. Such bruises can take weeks or more to heal depending on their severity. The frequency with which Monty was beaten suggests that his mother could likely have beaten him over bruises that were still unhealed, inflicting greater pain. The beatings could also have caused broken skin and bleeding. It is possible he was left with scars from the beatings or other physical injuries. To frequently beat a child who is still growing can certainly cause underlying physical damage.

For most people it is difficult to see a child suffering or crying. Even for strangers, the natural instinct is to be comforting to a child who is in pain. More so is it for parents. Most mothers do not want to see their children hurting. Even to see an animal in pain will move people to pity; when confronted with a less powerful creature in a state of suffering, it is normal to experience an emotional reaction and to wish to help or alleviate this

suffering. Therefore, for a mother to be capable of inflicting such severe pain on her own young child and to continue doing so regularly without pity is extremely cruel and unnatural.

None of Monty's actions justified this type of response from her. We must consider the abusive nature of these 'punishments' and the fact that their root cause was not Monty at all. Maud had learned this behaviour from her father. Often a domestically abusive parent will single out one particular child as a focus of their hostile feelings, routinely blame this child for problems and make them feel unlovable, unwanted and generally like a 'bad child' for no valid reason. This phenomenon is known as 'scapegoating'. Monty wrote that he was 'the bad boy' of his family and made it clear that none of his siblings received the same amount of punishment or negative attention as he did. He seems to have assumed it was because of his ornery behaviour. However, Monty was not truly the problem.

The extent to which Maud mistreated her son destroyed his attachment to her and resulted in him cutting her off as soon as he could. As a grown man, Montgomery refused contact with his mother; he was capable of tolerating her on occasion but consistently avoided her whenever possible. He forbade his own son David from meeting or staying with his grandmother. During and after the Second World War, Monty refused to be in the same room with his mother or attend public events with her, which caused his family some embarrassment. He did not attend his mother's funeral nor did he allow his son to attend. Some have attempted to cast Monty's behaviour as petty or vindictive, or point to instances where he did have contact with his mother so as to imply that the relationship wasn't as bad as Montgomery claimed. It is clear from his actions and statements that Montgomery never forgot what his mother did to him and justifiably viewed her as a harmful influence; he desired no relationship with her and attempted to shield his own child from someone he rightly viewed as destructive and toxic.

False Accusations

Society is afflicted with the strange hypocrisy of praising people for standing out for strength of character while at the same time judging human beings for suffering in their lives. Suffering is a stigma. Oftentimes, when the general public hears of a person having experienced some disadvantage or suffering from a crime or abuse, the masses are quick to raise amateurish judgments about whether a person can be 'normal' afterwards or not. A person whose difficulties are known to others will often go through life being unjustly singled out and treated as if there is 'something wrong' with them, or as if what they have suffered makes them a perpetual victim – or even as if they have inherited some of the negativity they have experienced. Sometimes in the case of abuse or a crime, the injured parties are unfairly treated by others like the embodiment of their experiences, as if some dust of evil remains on them in addition to the hurt they have felt.

In recent years we have seen society no longer calling people victims or stigmatizing them, but in recognizing their resilience as survivors. Nowadays society is more supportive of people who have the courage to speak out about hardships and difficulties in their lives and who set a good example for others. This recent change in society to acknowledge the presence of human suffering in the world and recognize those who have met it with strength – this shedding of complacent bystanders' hypocrisy that we are seeing in the world now – is a very good thing.

Sadly it was not the case when Bernard Montgomery had the courage to describe the traumas and difficulties of his own childhood in 1958. Again Monty showed bravery in describing the struggles of his youth and the abuse he suffered at home. Throughout his life he tried to be the opposite of the negative experiences he had – whether in his childhood or in the trenches of the First World War, he resisted being overwhelmed by these harmful experiences, learned how to counteract them and deliberately tried to use what he had endured to do positive things for others. He wanted to be a force for good in the world and to help and inspire other people as much as he could. It seems also that is what he hoped to do by describing some of these challenges in his writings.

Yet Montgomery's unpleasant experiences were taken out of context. A host of political enemies, rivals, and judgmental historians skewed things in

his life story and used them to stick a variety of labels on him that are not only ill-fitting but totally unjust. The post-war era was one of sanctimony – a time when people who differed from idealized notions or who experienced difficulties were even more stigmatized than in recent years. Historians of that era often belonged to privileged social groups and often wrote from limited and condescending viewpoints. It is time to re-evaluate Montgomery and see that the unjust labels laden upon his memory for so long are peeled away in the light of his proven dignity and good character.

Despite being a highly successful military commander well-liked by his troops, Montgomery was savaged following the Second World War and especially after his death in 1976 by a variety of critics who attempted to portray him as a detestable and abnormal individual by attacking his character, sexuality, personality, manners and anything else they could think of. These common allegations can all be clearly disproven – and will be, in this introduction to Montgomery's life.

We will start here with the accusations of narcissism, psychopathy, and even autism that have been levelled against Monty.

No Personality Disorders

In recent years it has become vogue to accuse famed military commanders of clinical narcissism or other personality disorders. Napoleon Bonaparte is often glibly referred to as a narcissist and has become the namesake of the 'Napoleon Complex', a popular but unscientific term implying that shorter men exhibit aggressive behaviour due to dissatisfaction with their height. The 'complex' itself is not recognized as a mental illness or personality disorder, nor has it ever been listed in any of the five Diagnostic and Statistics Manuals (DSMs) published by the American Psychiatric Association.

In fact, a narcissistic personality disorder is a serious condition that can only be assessed with proper use of psychological research and objectivity, and which requires at least five or nine traits present; anything less than that is a misdiagnosis. People with justified confidence, above average abilities or ambitions can wrongly be labelled as narcissists.

It is more than ironic that Monty has been accused of having various personality disorders while his American military contemporaries have not faced the same accusations. Indeed much of the vitriol against Montgomery originated from American generals who arguably had a vested interest in disparaging the more experienced British commander to enhance their own lacking military reputations. Pre-eminent among them was Dwight Eisenhower, a politically ambitious individual with no combat experience who used the status he gained as Supreme Allied Commander during the Second World War as a platform to gain the US presidency. The power that Eisenhower accumulated in his increasingly political roles and wielded in post-war society gave him a significant advantage in cultivating positive publicity for himself and in disparaging Montgomery, whom he once called a 'psychopath'. This false – and frankly horrifying – accusation has sadly been repeated.

Most people do not understand the true meaning of the term psychopath or what it really means to call another person one. The defining attributes of any psychopath are a total lack of empathy and care for other people, actions that are persistently harmful to others and inability to feel remorse or regret. This description appropriately fits some of the worst and most evil criminals that the world has ever known. This term is in no way attributable to Montgomery.

Monty had genuine empathy for his men and affection for other people. Throughout his entire life, he showed compassion towards others, mentorship, public service and tendency to place his own interests last before the needs of others. As a commander, he showed an extraordinary level of care for his troops' basic human necessities. He led a life of service, consistently putting himself last. He worked tirelessly during the war and demanded no extra comforts or privileges for himself. He was dedicated to the Allied cause. He mentored junior officers, gave them career advice and always saw to it that his officers and men had constant contact with their families and were treated with human kindness and respect. Neither a psychopath nor a narcissist would have been remotely capable of achieving any of these things.

Psychological studies on leadership prove that Montgomery exemplified the qualities of a competent and compassionate leader. Studies demonstrate good leaders show honesty and are attentive to the personal needs of those around them, and that their good qualities resonate with other people. This is an apt description of the type of leader Montgomery was. His genuinely good moral character, skills at communicating and ability to sincerely relate to other people were assets to him as a leader. It is yet more evidence that these accusations of personality disorders are wholly unfounded.

As for the autism accusations, it goes without saying that having a blunt and direct speaking style and enthusiasm about one's profession are not enough to diagnose a person with such a condition, otherwise a majority of people in the world – including every single one of the other army, navy and air force commanders of the Second World War, not to mention a majority of their officers – would qualify as autistic. This suggestion is yet another example of how Monty's behaviour has been distorted, taken out of context and unfairly judged.

Just because Montgomery suffered from hardship and abuse does not mean he became an abusive person. There are plenty of examples to be found in the world of good, talented and caring people who have been orphaned, had difficult childhoods, or experienced hard or unusual circumstances in life. Montgomery's life and actions show that he possessed a deep sense of empathy and fairness towards other people. It is true Montgomery had a strong character and was bossy. So is every successful military commander – and indeed successful people in other professions. It is also true that he was highly detail-orientated in many ways and this combination of being bossy and detail-orientated meant he could often be controlling. Many people have these characteristics, which are not innately negative traits. It is also true that Montgomery was ambitious and could sometimes be detached and calculating. This is also true of many people. Furthermore, discipline, attention to detail and the ability to be personally detached from strategic situations are the qualities of a good military commander, and Montgomery was a gifted strategist. Evidence shows Montgomery genuinely cared about other people. He does not merit any of

the negative accusations that have been made about his personality or mental health.

A Born Soldier

Monty had always liked soldiers from an early age and said he had wanted to become one at about age 5 or 6. He particularly idolized Horatio Nelson, who he admired not only for his victories but for the bond of brotherhood he inspired among his men. He later recalled to the BBC that the moment he knew he wanted to join the army was when he watched soldiers in red coats marching off to fight in the Boer War. 'I said, "That's the stuff for me"!' he recalled to the BBC later in life.

His family, totally absorbed in the church, was upset about his decision, which he announced while he was studying at St. Paul's School in London. They had predestined Monty to become a clergyman notwithstanding that he was the opposite of religiously inclined. In a testament to how distant he was from his son's personality, Henry reacted with disappointment at Monty's decision to join the army instead of the church. Furthermore, in a particular stroke of irony, his grandfather Frederic Farrar had expressed a horror for military men; in his book *Eric – Or Little By Little* he described a villainous boy in the story as fulfilling his moral doom by joining the military and characterized sailors as monstrous for their swearing and rough ways. From the perspective of his mother's family, Monty's choice to become a soldier was nothing less than choosing a life of vice and immorality over the path of the church. Monty's desire for adventure and decision to break free should have surprised nobody. He did not regret it and later said that he would choose to be a soldier again if given the choice.

Monty attended what was then called the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. He was a promising cadet and became a colour sergeant and leader of B Company. This environment was different and more competitive than at St. Paul's. Monty had several disadvantages here. He was financially poor and couldn't afford any luxuries beyond his tuition. He lacked military tradition in his family; being the son of a bishop must have been unusual for a cadet. Physically he was also much shorter than average. These factors

may have attracted some bullying or teasing. If so, Monty never complained openly about it. However he did admit to becoming a bully himself.

The beatings that Monty grew up with seemingly taught him a language of violence. While it is normal for cadets to brawl and scrap, Montgomery took it to a whole new level. As the head of B Company, which under his instigation became known as ‘Bloody B’, Monty led a gang that got into fights with other boys using fire pokers. Since he had become used to being caned from such a young age, it is likely he was already very hardened to the experience of getting beat up. It’s also likely that he viewed hitting others as tolerable behaviour since that is what had often happened to him during his formative years. The degree of violence exceeded what instructors at Sandhurst were used to and caused concerns among the faculty. Monty was nearly expelled after setting another cadet’s shirt on fire in a prank. He was ultimately demoted and held back; his class graduated ahead of him within a year while he passed out in a year and a half with the rank of Private.

After his near catastrophe at Sandhurst, Monty turned over a new leaf. What changed his life, according to him, was the support of adults – in this case, senior officers – who recognized his good points and his potential, and were interested in giving him career advice and emotional support. Montgomery credited their good influence in setting him in the right direction. This is often the case for young people who grow up in disadvantaged or abusive environments. An adult mentor who is emotionally supportive can make all the difference in setting a good example and helping the young person develop their talents and achieve goals. This is what happened for Monty – and it inspired him to do the same for others.

As he matured, Monty wanted to help disadvantaged and delinquent boys and young officers who were adrift. Recognizing his own struggles in what he saw of their behaviour, he wanted to be that supportive mentor who helped them discover their talents and get on the path to a rewarding life. He would go out of his way to mentor young soldiers who appeared directionless, offering support, kindness and advice. He donated to charities in support of disadvantaged youth. He paid for an underprivileged boy from

London's East End to attend a better school. Later Monty learned that his financial support had a positive impact on the life of this young man, who he only met in person once. Monty tried to turn his negative experiences into something helpful for others, and doing so meant a great deal to him.

Later on in life, Montgomery would write an obituary for a former ADC and liaison officer, Major Charles Sweeny, who was tragically killed on 9 May 1945 in a car accident the day after V-E Day. Monty had taken Sweeny under his wing. What Monty wrote about their bond in a tribute was very telling: 'Charles was an orphan and possibly it was that fact which drew us close together'. This speaks volumes. Monty himself was not an orphan but seemed to view himself as one. This is why he was so willing to be a caring father figure to others.

Marriage and Family

Montgomery did not marry until he was nearly 40. He wrote that he was uninterested in courting women and stressed his focus on his career. His claims of not having any relationships with women have led to rumours that he was a sexually inhibited person due to some personality dysfunction or that he was a closet homosexual; these rumours are entirely baseless. It has also been openly assumed that Montgomery remained a virgin prior to his marriage.

Needless to say, being unwilling to commit to a steady relationship or get married is different from lacking sexual experience. Young British soldiers on overseas deployments had plenty of opportunities to get sexual experience with women without having to court or romance them. As has already been established, Montgomery was the opposite of prudish. He had a sense of humour about sex, derived amusement from the banter of other soldiers, and was progressive in his approach to allowing his men to get what they needed in terms of female company. His advocacy for condoms and decisions to set up medically hygienic brothels for his troops in India and Egypt was liberated enough back then to scandalise people. He also understood the need of soldiers to romp during periods of leave and would facilitate R&R as a favour for men around him who needed it. It's difficult

to imagine the adventurous Monty shying away from getting to know the facts of life in his youth. This would hardly have been something that he would have broadcast to the public. Rather than being repressed, Monty's behaviour and attitudes suggests he was a seasoned soldier who enjoyed his freedom and didn't want to commit to a relationship or be tied down.

However this impacted Monty's career. It was impossible for a British officer to advance beyond a certain rank without getting married because of the social side of the job; colonels were expected to organize social events with other officers and their wives, and the 'married set' would find it odd to socialize under the auspices of a feral bachelor. Montgomery was ambitious and wanted to command the 1st Battalion of his regiment, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. This may explain the reason why he suddenly decided to go wife hunting before he hit age 40. Another reason might have been simple biology. Montgomery expressed strong fatherly feelings throughout his lifetime. It is possible he may have desired to start a family.

His first proposal of marriage was to Betty Anderson. She was then 17 and Monty, then 37, met her while on vacation in Dinard, France in 1925. Much has been made of the age difference. This would not have been something too irregular, however; Field Marshal Douglas Haig for example was 18 years older than his wife Dorothy. Monty's own father had married his mother when he was in his 30s and she was 16, and they had produced a large family. Such age differences did happen and were socially acceptable; Monty could have hoped to start a large family himself. Anderson was also very pretty, with an angelic oval face, delicate features and smooth golden hair. She also happened to be a music student, and Montgomery showed a lifelong interest in and appreciation of music. Apparently feeling shy, Monty asked a friend to introduce him before he took the young lady for a whirl around the dance floor. By the time they finished dancing, Monty remarked that he wanted to marry her. The smitten Monty attempted to express his admiration for her beauty. Anderson may have been an English rose but otherwise she was very much an ice queen. She was snobbish towards Monty. She later expressed scorn about his attempted compliments.

Montgomery seems to have made numerous and heartfelt efforts to woo her. He persevered with great affection over the entirety of the next year. He wrote to her parents to seek their approval of a relationship. Although her parents did approve, Anderson herself remained condescending. Monty took her out frequently and attempted to get to know her. He tried to share his thoughts and feelings with her, such as his worries about another world war and his plans for the future. He also attempted to learn more about her musical talents and interests, which greatly appealed to him. Anderson was uninterested. She later patronizingly said that she thought he was boring, although it is unknown whether she feigned politeness at the time. Montgomery attempted to win her heart for months without success. She began avoiding him.

The ultimate rejection involved mockery. Discovering Monty wanted to meet her at a fancy dress ball she planned to attend at a resort in Lenk, Switzerland in 1926, Anderson dressed up as a boy, smeared her face so as to appear dirty and railed loudly in a cockney accent to get rid of him, laughing with her friends. Such an awkward scene would have been humiliating for then-Major Montgomery, who had behaved towards her with all-out chivalry and attempted to look dashing for this occasion. He had dressed as Napoleon for the ball. To be rejected and publicly humiliated at once would have wounded and angered any man. Montgomery in particular did not take well to being insulted. The last time he spoke with Betty Anderson, he seethed: ‘I will wash you out of my life!’

After having been effectively dumped by the girl, he found himself alone at the Swiss resort. Probably in an attempt to assuage his wounded pride, he chose not to leave but turned his attention elsewhere. Out of the blue, Montgomery approached a mother with two teenage boys. He introduced himself and volunteered to give the boys skiing lessons. Their mother, Betty Carver, nee Hobart, was a widow. She had a husky build, a prominent nose, a large square jaw, a short wedge of frizzy dark hair, and was nearly 40. This Betty looked nothing like Monty’s first choice for a bride whom he had considered attractive. ‘She wasn’t pretty at all’, Monty’s sister said later in a documentary. Moreover she hated the military. Her first husband had been killed at Gallipoli and she had taught their sons to despise

anything to do with soldiers. Similar to Monty's relatives who he did not get along with, Betty had staunch Christian views. She was also a pacifist. She wanted to be an artist and was living a bohemian lifestyle. She took her views seriously. Her two sons were initially unimpressed by Montgomery.

Despite these aspects of Betty that must have been immediately off-putting to him, plus the fact they had nothing in common, Montgomery kept hanging around the family and did his best to befriend them. The following year in 1927, Monty took another trip to Lenk to meet up with Betty again. After a relatively short period in which he succeeded in getting on better terms with her – despite their differences he was able to make her laugh at his jokes – Monty proposed marriage. This proposal came after Betty suggested they not see each other anymore due to potential gossip about his constant following her around. She seems not to have viewed Montgomery in a romantic light. His speedy proposal came as a surprise to both mother and sons.

They had no idea that this marriage proposal was very much a Plan B for Montgomery – that he had in fact protested his affections with much greater passion and determination to another very different Betty only a very short time ago. Monty was apparently bent on getting married. On the rebound from being rejected, he had somehow decided, in apparent coldness, that Betty the widow would fit the bill. It wasn't the first time he would make a cold decision and attempt to grow into it – during the Second World War, for example, his famous tanker's beret was portrayed as a friendly gift from a soldier. A soldier did give it to him but hardly under the spontaneous circumstances as first described. Monty later admitted that his decision to wear it was a 'cold' one 'made in the study' to help the men get to know him, although he said he came to appreciate it.

Nobody suspected that anything other than some strange romantic phenomenon had occurred between him and Betty Carver. The two were married that same year in 1927. Montgomery's father performed the marriage ceremony. The couple had a son, David, the following year. The rosy view of Monty and Betty's marriage holds that the couple experienced a romantic Renaissance of 'opposites attract'. In reality, this was not a fairytale romance but a marriage of convenience. Montgomery had not

approached Betty out of natural attraction or genuine interest – as he had with the first Betty – but rather because he wanted to marry somebody and decided he could put up with her. Furthermore Betty herself did not seem to have any attraction to him and was on the point of asking him to go away, which forced him to propose rather abruptly. However awkward, the marriage offered both parties a solution to their mutual problem of being alone. Monty had decided that he needed a wife while Betty knew that having a husband to support her and her two sons would make her life easier.

It is true that Montgomery had been lonely and seems to have been happy after he got married, if not out of authentic attraction or shared interests, then due to the ordinary human happiness of having company and people to look after. There is every indication Betty appreciated being able to enjoy a more comfortable life. In fact her motivation for marrying Montgomery seems to have been predominantly materialistic. Both of their families had ties to Northern Ireland, which seems to have helped them bond. However their interests and beliefs remained fundamentally different. Monty never learned to appreciate Christian pacifism, which he later sharply criticized in his writings, nor was he naturally attracted to the cerebral bohemian lifestyle that Betty sought after. Betty was disinterested in the soldierly spirit and interests that formed the core of Monty's personality; she adapted to being an officer's wife but did not get over her dislike of war and military matters. She seems to have had a lofty personality and acclimated to Monty with some amount of condescension; her highbrow artistic friends looked down on him as dull. It is unfortunate that the brave and brilliant soldier Montgomery remained unappreciated and not fully embraced for who he was in his home life. Having experienced a difficult childhood and being rejected scathingly in his previous effort at courtship, Monty was probably gladdened by any attention he received from Betty and may have believed this marriage was the best he could get; clearly he tried to make the most of it.

Monty did his best to make the marriage work. He threw himself energetically into caring for his newfound family – to the point of micromanaging. He was controlling to excess – he measured the lawn, took

charge of everything in the house, and regularly left lists of instructions for Betty to follow at home. Betty often ignored his demands, which probably irritated him. However Monty did not stop making those demands and kept producing the lists. Although ‘opposites attract’ sounds nice in theory, it’s actually very difficult for people who have starkly opposing views, divergent personalities and a lack of common interests to get along harmoniously or form a very profound relationship. Instead of a blithe utopia, it seems this marriage would have produced tensions and difficulties. The more likely scenario is that instead of being carried away by Cupid, Monty and his wife became friends over the years in a process of ‘making do’ with each other. Later in life, Monty often expressed his belief that the key to a good relationship was ‘spending more time together’. Strangely this statement echoes theories about finding happiness in arranged marriages.

With regard to military matters, Montgomery’s career was relatively unremarkable during the marriage. He did succeed in his ambition of rising to command his regiment’s 1st Battalion shortly afterward in 1931, which is a testament to what getting married did to improve his status in the army – as he had predicted it would. Otherwise, Monty’s progress as a soldier slowed down. It has been suggested Montgomery was such an eccentric that the distraction of having to look after Betty ‘stabilised’ him somehow and allowed him to have a quiet enough career so as to be promoted later. This suggestion is naïve and assumes he was an eccentric, which he was not. It also undervalues Monty’s skill and professionalism as a soldier. He was highly competent at his job and without need of stabilising. From a purely professional standpoint, it seems that, as he turned his attention to ‘managing’ Betty and the boys, his career stalled.

After 10 years of marriage, Betty died unexpectedly in 1937 shortly before Monty’s 50th birthday. She was staying at a beach resort at Burnham-on-Sea with their son David when she was stung on the foot by some creature as they walked across the beach. This creature remains unidentified. Monty believed it was an insect. However there have been some seemingly credible speculations that it was actually a poisonous sea creature, such as a venomous sea snail. Montgomery was not present when

this event occurred. He was participating in a large-scale military training exercise quite some distance away on Salisbury Plan.

Monty seems initially to have believed his wife's injury was minor and she would recover. His behaviour appears to have been somewhat callous during the long ordeal that followed. Betty was hospitalized and Montgomery drove back and forth to visit her. Although he checked in on her, Monty appeared to others as brusque and uncaring, and preoccupied with his own activities. Eventually it became clear that Betty would not recover and her condition became perilous. She was suffering from the effects of a poison spreading from the wound. Badly shaken, Montgomery attempted to save Betty's life by having her leg amputated. To make such a decision would have been horrific. The amputation was not successful in stopping the poison's effects and it became clear she would die. Betty was shocked to discover her condition was fatal. Montgomery did his best to comfort his wife, remaining with her and holding her in his arms. He read to her from the Bible to give her courage. It was in this manner that she died while he read Psalm 23.

Her death shattered Montgomery. Suddenly he was alone again and the manner in which it happened was nothing less than horrifying. Anyone else in his circumstances might have felt guilty about not taking Betty's injury seriously at first and perhaps wondered if there was something more that could have been done. To make matters worse, he was doomed to return to their empty house, which he had recently finished furnishing in Portsmouth that was filled with her belongings. (Their property from this house in Portsmouth, moved into storage, was later bombed into oblivion by the German Luftwaffe in 1941.) He gave Betty a small funeral to which practically nobody was invited. Afterwards he locked himself away amid the throes of a deep depression. Eventually he snapped out of it.

It is interesting to study how Monty presented his marriage in his memoirs. He wrote about it in a very different style from the rest of the narrative, which flows and is chronological. The marriage story is not woven together with the rest of the memoir but encapsulated from beginning to end in its own separate passage – like an open-and-shut case. The concise and highly emotional style in which he presented his marriage

left no room for questions and few insights into the decade of their relationship. The usually private Montgomery went through great lengths to stress that his marriage was bliss and his relationship with Betty Carver was 'the first and only time' he had fallen in love.

This seems to be another example of Montgomery's avoidance of discussing upsetting matters and stretching facts. With careful and artful word choices, he created an illusion for readers with surgical precision and spared himself the embarrassment of revealing details about his private life. True to his parting vengeful words at the Swiss resort, he completely erased Betty Anderson from his life story. He was not forthcoming about his deliberate search for a wife nor about the ulterior motives he had in initially approaching Betty Carver after getting rejected. The blinkered, open-and-shut style in which he portrayed his love life also conveniently swept away his seemingly intimate and much-talked-about relationship with an American actress, which had fuelled a lot of rumours only three years before he published his 1958 memoir (see **'Monty's American Girlfriend?'** below).

He stressed that after being widowed, he had no interest in remarrying. He claimed he didn't think he could ever love again in the manner that he had. But what did that actually mean? Some have taken this statement at face value, assuming it meant he was unable to get over his sadness about the death of his wife and never wanted another relationship. But is that really what it meant? It is true that Montgomery was deeply grieved after the loss. However being single was easy for Monty, which he admitted. He had formed an attachment to Betty over time, but one must consider that making the marriage work may have taken some effort on Monty's part. He may not have wanted to take on another commitment or make similar efforts. He could simply have wished to focus on his career, which he found personally fulfilling. Not wanting to commit to a relationship doesn't mean that he never again had any interest in or sexual intimacy with women.

Sexuality

There have been some meritless debates about Montgomery's sexuality which began circulating after his death. These baseless rumours allege that because he had no known relationships with women outside of his rather awkward marriage to a widow and because he remained single for most of his life while trying to be a loving father figure to younger officers and boys that he was a repressed homosexual. It is categorically untrue. In the first place, there was nothing repressed about Montgomery's personality – he was extroverted and could never be made to feel ashamed of himself, which was why he irritated some people.

Although he was usually fair-minded, Montgomery showed a streak of bigotry when it came to homosexuality. In this he was not alone. Other people during that time period had strong feelings against it. When Parliament discussed the decriminalization of homosexuality in the Sexual Offences Bill of 1965, Montgomery was one of its most vehement opponents. He protested against legal mercy for homosexuals numerous times to the point of raising a ruckus in Parliament. 'I regard the act of homosexuality in any form as the most abominable bestiality that any human being can take part in and which reduces him almost to the status of an animal', declared Montgomery, claiming that it was 'evil', 'unnatural', and would result in the moral collapse of Britain's youth and armed forces. He accused Parliament of destroying the moral foundation of the nation. 'I have heard some say … that such practices are allowed in France and in other NATO countries. We are not French, and we are not other nationals. We are British, thank God!' he vented, arguing at length with others who had more liberal views.

Other members of Parliament spoke with eloquence and consideration of the plight of homosexuals who faced arrest. Some discussed homosexuals they knew personally and drew attention to the fact that homosexuality had long existed below the surface of British society. They attempted to evoke mercy and urged tolerance. Advocates of the bill attacked Montgomery for being spiteful and un-Christian. They directly challenged him about being unjust towards homosexuals as surely, they reasoned, he must have been aware of homosexuals among the troops during his army career. Montgomery was defiant. He continued to verbally

brawl with other speakers and was fierce in advancing his cause. When Parliament discussed an acceptable legal age limit for homosexuality, Monty announced that he had turned in a paper requesting the age limit be raised to 80 – he said that somebody who was 80 was practically dead anyway and moreover could afford to pay any blackmail money. He contemptuously suggested that the name of the bill be changed to 'A Charter for Buggery'. He made it clear multiple times that he was 'entirely opposed' to mercy for homosexuals. When politely asked to reconsider his views, he refused point-blank and instead attempted to rally members of Parliament to his side with fiery statements. Monty's divisive views and unruly behaviour gave rise to squabbling and disorder amid the proceedings on more than one occasion.

It is clear that Monty was acting in accord with his inner principles here. He was outspoken and immovable about his beliefs. This gets at the heart of Montgomery's character. If indeed Monty had been a repressed homosexual or had any sense of personal empathy towards people in same-sex relationships, or if he himself had ever had any homosexual lovers, he would have stayed true to these inner convictions and appealed for clemency – as so many other distinguished members of society were then doing. It would have been an ideal opportunity to speak in defence of homosexuality, as Oscar Wilde had done eloquently, or at least appeal for mercy for those who were homosexually inclined, and as other notable members of Parliament were not afraid to do. Montgomery took the very opposite approach. He did so because he was convinced of his point of view. Throughout his life, Monty was steadfast in standing up for and speaking out about his inner beliefs no matter how others reacted. This is why he often locked horns with other people. To suggest he was somehow a 'secret' homosexual makes no sense. It would imply that Monty was lying about his strong beliefs, which would be impossible as it would be inconsistent with his very nature.

It has been claimed that Montgomery would have formed tendencies towards homosexual affection as this was common in British boarding schools. However, this claim ignores the fact that Montgomery had actually been raised in the boondocks of Australia and had not been part of the

boarding school system before he arrived in England as a teenager. He boarded at St. Paul's School for a relatively short time – where he came across as an ungainly rugby 'monkey' who liked doughnuts and was baffled by life in England – before going straight into the army. Furthermore this theory ignores the examples of other men who attended British all-male boarding schools for their entire childhoods and teenage years without becoming homosexually inclined. Thus this suggestion is inaccurate.

As a corollary to the false rumours about Montgomery, attention has been drawn to the strong feelings of affection he expressed for young officers and boys, and his desire to be a fatherly and emotionally supportive figure for them. People who assume this behaviour was a sign of homosexuality have completely ignored the facts of Montgomery's difficult childhood, namely the abuse and neglect he suffered which led him to become a bully, and the great emphasis he placed on caring adult mentors who he credited with saving him from taking a wrong path in life. Montgomery made it abundantly clear in his actions, statements and writings that he wanted to be a good influence on boys as other grown men had been for him when he was coming of age and starting his career. This has nothing to do with sexuality. It has to do with character formation. It is common, for example, for successful men who have come from violent and impoverished neighbourhoods to mentor boys facing similar challenges to help them become successful also. This was the nature of the friendships Monty cultivated with younger men, especially those he believed could use a supportive and fatherly influence. It was a type of personal crusade. He saw himself as a potential role model.

Montgomery's heterosexuality should not be in any doubt. Apart from the fact that he dated Betty Anderson, had been married, and was vehement in his disapproval of homosexuality, ample evidence exists of his interest in women. It has been mentioned already that Montgomery had very liberated views when it came to casual sex in the military; he was an outspoken advocate for this, facilitating his men's access to condoms as well as healthy prostitutes. During the First World War, a fellow officer in Monty's regiment, Captain Robert Hamilton, was billeted in a French farmhouse with Monty and their comrades in early October 1914. The farmhouse was

owned by a woman and there were several farm girls living there. Before the group of soldiers moved off, they decided to bestow kisses on each of the girls. According to Hamilton's diary: 'All the farm girls lunched with us and we had great fun. We kissed them all … They didn't in the least mind … ' While he mentions that one officer stole two kisses per girl, nobody abstained; Hamilton, a personal acquaintance of Monty who often mentioned him in the diary, would have noted it. We can therefore assume that Monty had just as much fun with those girls as his friends did. On a visit to Belgium in 1946, Montgomery very publicly enjoyed a kiss on the lips from a pretty young woman who presented him with roses – so much so that he pursued her for a second round. The Field Marshal's amorous effrontery remains immortalized on newsreel footage. At first starting the motion of kissing the woman on the cheek, Monty attempted to give her a peck on the lips and missed. The young lady quickly offered Monty a real kiss. The Field Marshal, visibly delighted, returned the kiss with gusto and enjoyed a brief lip lock with the girl. Apparently it wasn't enough for him. As the young woman left, Monty pursued her, shoving his bouquet of flowers unceremoniously onto a bystander. He pulled the girl over to him and gave her a second very emphatic kiss on the mouth before releasing her. It is interesting to note that this young lady had blonde hair, like Betty Anderson and an American actress with whom Monty would have a brief scandal in the 1950s. Montgomery wouldn't have bothered stealing kisses had he not been attracted to women.

Monty seems to have enjoyed flirting with women and sometimes got along better with the wives of famous dignitaries than with their husbands. He chose illustrations for his books and captioned them; one picture he selected to appear in his memoirs was a leggy shot of Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) girls in bathing suits by a poolside, which Monty appreciatively labelled as, 'Something for the troops in the action to dream about!' He described the pool, located at an ATS barracks, as 'excellent'; it's not clear if he inferred that from a distance or ever stopped by for a visit. An American news correspondent who met Monty for an interview in Sicily during the Second World War was surprised when Monty, pulling him aside for a private question, asked 'shyly' if it was true that women in

New York were wearing Monty-style berets. The general was flattered to hear that American ladies admired his style. At the end of the Second World War, the Americans hosted a party in Berlin where female burlesque dancers performed topless. Monty noted that, 'The Russians had apparently never seen … anything like this before, and their eyes almost popped out of their heads!' The Russians hadn't, but he apparently had, and didn't seem to mind. There are numerous other anecdotes which imply Monty was attracted to women and found soldiers' sexual jokes amusing.

Although Monty made it clear that he didn't want to marry again, that does not mean he never had any sexual encounters with women at any point in his single life. It is true that he was a very self-disciplined man dedicated to his work, but he was human and such a possibility cannot be ruled out. As in the case of his early courtship of Betty Anderson, he was capable of being secretive.

Monty's American Girlfriend?

One female companion of Monty's may justify some speculation: American singer, actress and model Constance 'Connie' Moore. Decades younger than Monty, Connie, an attractive vixen known for her glamour and curvaceous figure, posed for swimsuit pinup photos and in 1944 for what Hollywood studios called 'leg art'. Although she had married her talent agent at a young age, she regularly worked and travelled apart from him. Described in a British newspaper in 1955 as 'a willowy Texas rose', she starred in musicals, comedies and various stage performances. Blonde at the time she met Monty, her oval face, fair hair and soft features in some ways caused her to physically resemble his old flame Betty Anderson. She and Monty travelled together on a transatlantic voyage from the US to the UK on the RMS *Queen Mary* in November 1955. This seems to have been the first time they met – although Monty had been in Hollywood and had met many performers previously, as he had been a guest of studio boss Samuel Goldwyn, toured movie sets and had a dinner party thrown in his honour that many stars had attended the previous year in 1954.

Monty was returning to England following a two-week US tour. Connie was headed to London to begin a stint of cabaret singing at the Café de Paris, where she had signed a contract to perform until New Year, bringing with her a trousseau of brand new slinky dresses for her nightclub act. While on the voyage, Montgomery celebrated his 68th birthday; he threw a small party. Otherwise we don't know what he got up to.

Aside from the fact that Connie's appearance would have been attractive to Monty and that, from Connie's point of view, he was a charismatic and famous British general, they shared common interests. Monty was delighted by music. His interest in music was something that increased the allure he felt towards Betty Anderson, who had been a music student. He never lost his enthusiasm for music and throughout his life enjoyed seeing musical shows at the theatre; indeed, to everybody's surprise, he later disclosed that his favourite song was an operetta ditty sung by doe-eyed blonde soprano Elizabeth Schwarzkopf. He also loved to joke around with people. Aside from being a professional singer and a star of musicals, Connie played comedy and liked to laugh. Like Monty's deceased wife, she also enjoyed painting still life as a hobby. Like Monty, she travelled a lot. She regularly went to New York, Los Angeles and had also met President Harry Truman on a visit to Washington, DC. Monty was familiar with the same people and places. Another thing they had in common was an interest in photography. Monty was a keen photographer and was proud of having had his photos exhibited and published; he owned many cameras. Connie also was a keen photographer and had brought her camera and spare film rolls to develop on the voyage. They had plenty to talk about – and perhaps they did more than just talk. Literally oceans away from civilization, the *Queen Mary* was ideal for discreet trysts; part of the ocean liner's historical mystique are the love affairs that famous travellers had aboard.

Given the privacy that was afforded them, we don't know all the details, but it later became apparent that the pair had spent a lot of time together during the voyage and had become very fond of each other. Rumours spread from London back to the USA after they were observed numerous times in

public engaging in apparently romantic behaviour – even being spotted one night holding hands.

When the pair disembarked at Southampton, photographers who greeted the American actress asked her how she spent her voyage. They had no idea then that she was even acquainted with Monty. Interestingly, Connie made no mention of Monty at all – neither that she had met the famous Field Marshal nor had spent any time with him. She only said that she had played records in the engine room, dined with the captain and developed her spare film rolls.

Soon, to the astonishment of the public, Monty began appearing with Connie on multiple occasions and in unexpected places. They appeared to be on intimate terms. He astounded onlookers by attending her cabaret performances at night at the Savoy and at the Café de Paris. For her opening night at the Café de Paris, Connie performed a crooning song called, 'You Are My Love', wearing a dress so skin-tight that she allegedly had difficulty getting up and down stairs. Young and beefy Hollywood star Van Johnson presented her with a bouquet of red roses – Connie rebuffed him by giving the roses back. However, after what was described as an impressive knock-out performance, she descended the stage and sat at Monty's table – not only at the same table, but right next to Monty, who had slipped into the nightclub after the initial wave of guests had arrived seemingly to avoid being spotted by the crowd. To the shock of onlookers, Monty was also found visiting Connie privately backstage. It emerged that they had met on the *Queen Mary* but nothing more was known.

The pair continued to materialize together. A month later in December, Monty appeared with Connie at the Bertram Mills Circus amid an array of British royalty and dignitaries. Every year the circus was accompanied by a luncheon and cocktail party. Monty usually avoided parties but this time came out of his shell. A radiant-looking Montgomery attended all three events with Connie. Monty usually appeared friendly in photos, but this time he looked different. He flashed a truly dazzling smile in Connie's company. Showing none of his usual reserve in his gestures, he was very animated watching the circus with her. Monty was also dressed to the nines. While his style was usually very sharp, this time his pizzazz surprised

people. He was decked out in a worsted suit – an expensive type of suit considered the crème de la crème of menswear – which was a sophisticated shade of blue, paired with a smart tie and a modish, sprucely folded pocket square.

The couple's happy and apparently intimate rapport astonished people. They beamed at each other with twinkling eyes like a pair of smitten teenagers. Sometimes during the Second World War Monty had appeared somewhat bashful and clumsy when receiving flowers from women, yet his manner with Connie was not awkward nor indeed even distant as one might expect among strangers. Monty's body language with Connie suggested familiarity. In one photo, a grinning Monty leans in towards Connie as they sit together, causing their shoulders to press against each other. Obviously he wasn't trying to keep a distance. Another photo shows an unusually giddy Field Marshal laughing with Connie and holding her mink coat bundled comfortably over his arm. The familiar manner in which Monty held her coat resembled how a man would hold a girlfriend's belongings; people usually try to be careful when holding a stranger's belongings. Furthermore Montgomery was not given to walking around holding ladies' coats. Members of the media also found the coat-holding – and indeed all the other telltale clues – noteworthy. The *Daily Mail* on 21 December 1955 described Monty as 'slightly flushed, dapper in blue suit, talking gaily with his companion, the beautiful American … carrying her fur coat as if he had been used to it for years'. When asked questions by the press, Monty implied that the circus date was a happenstance promise he had made to an acquaintance. That seems to have been an understatement.

It was at nighttime at the circus that the hand-holding occurred. Montgomery and Connie, sitting in a dimly lit private booth, were clearly seen holding hands through the duration of the lion and tiger act. It wasn't long before gossip about the couple appeared in British tabloids and spread back across the United States. The headlines were racy: 'Monty, Constance Moore Make News Holding Hands', 'Monty and Actress Acting Chummy', 'Monty Escort of U.S. Torch Singer', were among more than a few. Photos of the pair enjoying each other's company spread. Nobody could quite figure out what Monty and Connie were doing together, but they suspected

enough. Indeed it seemed obvious that the answer was a result of ‘the human factor’, to ironically quote one of Monty’s favourite phrases. The rumours became so intense that Connie felt forced to deny them to the press. She claimed it was a platonic relationship. Of Monty, however, she said, somewhat tellingly, ‘He’s a wonderful man – I’m thrilled’. We don’t know if her denial is credible, but the couple’s behaviour and the photos of them together suggest that her admission that Monty had ‘thrilled’ her was true.

She continued to perform in London and her shows were popular enough to warrant a brief extension of her contract. However the couple came under such intense public scrutiny that it wasn’t long before they got out of town. By January 1956 Connie had returned to the United States and Monty was travelling in Rome.

Had Monty enjoyed a post-war fling with the American bombshell? It appears possible. In the opinion of this author, it is likely. Connie ticked all the right boxes for him in terms of appearance, interests and personality. In this author’s opinion, Monty could easily have become besotted with her, and Connie could easily have been by him as well. Aside from being a famous war hero, Monty was a physically fit, handsome and charismatic military man, with a personality mixing rakish swagger with the charms of a British gentleman. He would have appealed to an American lady. While a long-term commitment was likely not in either of their best interests, that would not necessarily have stopped them from having a good time together.

Monty’s many travels would have made it easy for him to have discreet dalliances with women. Most soldiers know this. Also despite his insistence on portraying himself as an isolated scorner of socials, he did in fact meet and know many people and attended varied events, dinners and parties; while not a barfly by any stretch of the word, he had plenty of opportunities to meet women. Monty clearly wanted to keep his private life beyond the reach of public scrutiny. It is indisputable that Monty was attracted to women, probably more so than he wanted people to know about.

The First World War

As with Rommel, the First World War had a tremendous impact on Monty's life and worldview. Montgomery's war experience was distinctly different from Rommel's however, and so were his reactions to it. Like most young soldiers at its outset, then Lieutenant Montgomery was looking forward to fighting. He seems to have believed that it really would be 'the war to end all wars' and expressed disgust with politicians for having made false promises and failing to prevent the Second World War which came about afterward. Much to his surprise, his first experience as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in 1914 was one of running away from the Germans during the Retreat from Mons. The fierce young officer hated the experience because it was both disorganized, demoralizing and humiliating. When he finally had an opportunity to fight, he and his men did not understand what they were supposed to accomplish. Men were shot and killed amid haphazard orders that seemed pointless and contradictory.

The aggressive Montgomery was eager to throw himself into the fray. In a testament to both his physical bravery and quick thinking, he used his brawling skills to deal with an enemy in a pinch. Suddenly finding himself faced with a much larger German and having only an officer's sword to fight with at the time, Monty took a flying leap at the German and kicked him below the belt. The German collapsed and Monty took him prisoner; he later joked about having had the 'element of surprise'.

At Meteren in northern France on 13 October 1914, Montgomery demonstrated extraordinary courage that earned him the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). A skilled bayonet fighter who had won prizes for his skill at it, Montgomery led his troops in an attack on an occupied village and charged the German trenches. He and his men drove the Germans clear out of the trenches during a fierce struggle at bayonet point. This fighting would have been particularly brutal and bloody. Monty not only took part in the fight himself but led the men around him with exceptional skill. After this action, Monty was targeted by a German sniper who shot him through the right lung. It should have been a fatal wound. Lying helplessly in the open, Monty seemed doomed. A man of his platoon rushed to his aid and started to tend his wound, plugging the bullet hole. He, too, was shot by the sniper. Taking a fatal bullet clear through the head, the Good Samaritan fell

dead on top of Monty. The sniper was not finished with Monty – indeed he was determined to kill him. Continuing to fire at Monty, the sniper missed his mark due to the corpse lying on top of him, which absorbed most of the shots. One bullet however hit Monty in the knee.

Presumed dead, Montgomery was left behind by his troops as his chest cavity filled up with blood. It started raining. Night covered the deserted battlefield full of corpses. This was the time when the notorious rats of the Western Front would come out to gnaw on the bodies. Having lain there about three hours, Montgomery was found by medics, barely alive, and taken back to an Advanced Dressing Station on a stretcher. Doctors initially believed there was no hope for him. A grave was dug for him. Nevertheless Montgomery stubbornly clung to life. He was sent back to hospital in England and miraculously made a full recovery, although surgery left him with 'half a tummy and one lung', he later said.

For his heroism that day, Montgomery received the DSO. Much later in his life, after he had become a knight of the Order of the Garter, Montgomery would wear his DSO medal pinned to the front of his Garter robes, against dress regulations but in keeping with his own wishes. That little medal meant a lot to him; he had come a long way since almost dying in the mud of Flanders and seems to have wished to remember that when he was surrounded by royalty and magnificence at the peak of his career.

Montgomery was mentioned in Dispatches several times throughout the course of the war. While he was recovering in the hospital, he had nothing much to do but think. His ponderings about war and about his career as a soldier led him to believe that he had been missing something. He experienced some sort of epiphany in hospital that lead him to believe he needed to rise to the top of his profession – to become a master of the art of war. He saw something wrong with the whole system and wanted to fix it himself. He decided that going back to the front line would mean risking untimely death and not allow him to achieve his strategic goal for his life, so he opted to transfer to become a staff officer.

Monty chose not to write in any detail about his First World War experiences. This sets him apart from other generals, especially his future opponent Rommel, who analyzed what they had done during their first war.

The few times that Monty described the war it was only to discuss the suffering he experienced, such as his wound, and the senselessness of the conflict, and sometimes to share vignettes with a dark sense of humour. When he wrote his global military history study called *A History of Warfare*, he refused to write about the First World War himself. He wrote a short passage about the awful conditions that he and others lived through but otherwise made the rather astonishing decision to summarize the strategic observations of other writers. Strangely enough the chapter also leans heavily to naval warfare which was not his area of expertise. This was yet another time when Monty deliberately avoided discussing a difficult subject.

One thing that comes across in Monty's existing writings about the war was the distress caused him by the dirty conditions. That was something that he did mention prominently whenever he wrote about the war. His diary entries from the war are terse to the point of near-silence and come across as though he were depressed, but they contain one common refrain – he noted every time he was able to bathe or shave, and marked how much time had elapsed between these occasions. Monty was a very neat, orderly and somewhat vain man. One gets the impression that being unable to wash and clean himself up for weeks and months upon end was personally excruciating for him. One can get a sense of his thoughts and feelings about this in his writings on morale, when he discussed the effects that being dirty had on a soldier's view of himself.

Other subjects he presented strong opinions about later in life were the need to bury corpses, for soldiers to have basic needs met and for troops to know that their commanders cared for them. He experienced the opposite of these things during the First World War, which was the lasting impression he took away from that conflict. As he rose higher in command, he made it his personal quest to guarantee none of his soldiers would experience such situations. He never lost his deep sense of empathy for the fighting man at the front. His troops knew it and loved him for it.

Approach to War

Monty was a very experienced fighter by the time he squared off with Rommel in North Africa. After the First World War, he fought insurgents during the Irish War of Independence and in Palestine – both bloody and unconventional conflicts, in which Monty fought well and thus disproved future critics who would later claim he was only good at fighting static 'set piece' battles. By contrast, Rommel had no further combat experience after the First World War and never served outside of Europe.

His decision to gain experience as a staff officer during the First World War worked wonders for him, because he got to know first-hand how a staff worked and how to get the most out of one's staff in different situations. He was so talented that he was serving as Chief of Staff by the age of 31. This experience made Monty a rare 'fighting general' who was also a skilled administrator. This is in contrast to Rommel who scorned administrative work as not worth his time.

Montgomery sought out higher education in war and leadership. He studied every aspect of military history and battle that he could. He developed a well-rounded approach to his profession. Rommel by contrast had little interest in studying politics, leadership, or personalities, arguably to his professional detriment; he also does not appear to have made any great efforts to have studied military history in depth, to explore European battlefields or try to learn bigger-picture lessons from the past.

War was personal for Montgomery. He was a very competitive man. There was nothing he liked more than a contest – a chance to match his skills against an opponent and win. The tougher the challenge, the more ready he was to take it on. He fiercely enjoyed making bets, matching wits with others in predictions for future events, winning at sports, and of course winning in battles. He loved both playing and watching rugby. It was rough and rowdy – his kind of game. As a cricket player he preferred the role of opening batsman, a particularly challenging position which requires great deftness and skill. When facing an opponent in the Second World War, he liked to get a photo of the individual commander he was up against and stick it on his wall to look at – in doing so, he attempted to get a sense of the other man's personality during their wrestling match on the battlefield. After beating each opponent, he left their photo hanging on his wall –

displaying them almost like a trophy hunter would with animal heads. In this regard, Monty was totally unlike Rommel. Rommel had a naturally easy-going personality and, although he was also a lively and athletic man, considered war like a ‘game’ or mathematical exercise to solve; he did not possess the same sort of fierce relish that Monty had for a good fight. Montgomery had more of an aggressive disposition than Rommel.

One of Monty’s greatest strengths was his focus on psychology and human nature. One might indeed say that Monty was a social scientist. He considered the human intellect and behaviour the core essence of everything. Then, as now, what Monty called ‘the human factor’ tends to be dismissed by military experts who prefer to focus on technology, weaponry or ‘the dispositions of an army at any given time’, as he put it. Montgomery saw things differently. ‘In war, it is the man that matters’, he wrote. He was ideally suited to grasping psychology and social science. He had an extremely high level of emotional intelligence.

He was passionate about his profession. He studied military history, weapons, artifacts, leaders and visited battlefields. He also studied leadership and policy, honing in on human character and motives. He was gifted at communicating with others and motivating them to accomplish what he wanted them to. Combined with his lifelong passion for war, fighting and studying military matters, Monty’s focus on the human aspects of warfare was fundamental to his battlefield success. He analyzed his enemies carefully and was successful in fighting them based on his study of their behaviour. His interest in and understanding of diverse cultures also helped him in arranging the dispositions of his international troops on the battlefield and in tasking units with missions which best suited their unique national characteristics.

Keenly perceptive, Monty had a gift for grasping the bigger picture and the roots of complex problems. This made him an exceptionally sharp analyst. He also had a sincere and profound empathy for his men, no matter their rank or nationality. Montgomery visited his troops, spoke with the men and got to know them; he made sure they personally knew who he was. He was not a cold-hearted general nor did he ever view or treat his troops as cannon fodder. He carefully considered and provided for their needs, even

of the most basic and personal type. He rotated combat-weary units out with fresh reserves to give them relief after hard fighting whenever possible. Monty's soldiers recognized he cared about them and developed a strong bond with him.

Montgomery approached war like a contest of dominance. Unlike Rommel, he was not interested in interacting with opponents like a 'game' or in sparring. He was only interested in totally beating the enemy and winning. His philosophy was one of total control; he would never allow himself to be drawn out or influenced by the enemy, but would instead seek to crush his opponents systematically and completely. This was his preferred fighting style. However Monty was adaptable and more than capable of being spontaneous and fighting off the cuff, as he did fighting insurgencies in Ireland and Palestine, and later during messy Second World War battles in Italy and in the Ardennes for example. In North Africa, he would need to use all his skills as he faced Rommel in the winter of 1942.

PART II

WHIRLWINDS OF FORTUNE

CHAPTER 5

CYCLONE IN THE DESERT

‘Beware the fury of a patient man.’

John Dryden,
Absalom and Achitophel, Part I

Smoke was rising steadily over Cairo by the time the new commander of Britain’s Eighth Army, Bernard Montgomery, got ready to start his mission on 12 August 1942. This was not the smoke of enemy weapons firing on the city, but smoke from heaps of confidential papers being burned by British government officials all over the metropolis, who set fire to their secrets in anticipation of an imminent German arrival. As black fumes poured from chimneys of government buildings everywhere, people steadily evacuated, fleeing Egypt in droves. The usually crowded bars, cafes, dives and dens of urban leisure all over Cairo and Alexandria were now practically deserted.

The British government tried to entreat the estimated 30,000 subjects of King George VI then living in Egypt to remain calm and stay put. But there was no quelling the sense of panic that had taken hold. People were making for the relative safety of Palestine, or wherever else they could go to.

Rommel was near. His supply situation was indisputably bad, but everybody knew that wouldn't stop the lucky daredevil Rommel from attacking. Nothing had stopped him so far. He was quiet now but his next move wouldn't be long in coming, the public thought. They expected his next conquest to be Cairo, Alexandria, or most likely both cities in short succession. Where one might have thought that the Egyptians would be pleased at the thought of a German victory over the British in Cairo, most native Cairenes were getting nervous about it. They had learned to live with the British. The Germans were an unknown factor. The once carefree city on the Nile reeked of fear.

Amid an atmosphere of panic and scraps of burnt British documents blowing around in the streets for days, Montgomery confidently walked down the front steps of Cairo's swanky Shepheard's Hotel. Having conferred about his orders with General Harold Alexander over afternoon tea, Montgomery would assume full command of his troops the next day on 13 August 1942. In those days Monty did not wear the trademark black tanker's beret that became associated with his public image later. When in uniform he wore a stiff so-called 'red cap' with a visor and looked like any other British officer – albeit with a powerful presence. He had arrived in Cairo in a rush – so much so that he did not yet have a desert uniform and was sweltering hot in full English service dress. Then staying in a room at the luxurious Mena House Hotel near the Great Pyramid, Monty spent the rest of the afternoon buying cooler clothing and stayed at the British embassy in the evening amid further meetings held there. He left for the front at 5 am the next day to the glorious golden and carnelian glow of an Egyptian dawn. It was indeed a new dawn for the Eighth Army, for the course of the Second World War and for the world at large.

One couldn't miss Monty, then age 54. He was short and lean but the force of his personality was immense. He brimmed with life. He didn't walk – he sauntered, usually with wide steps and his hands in his pockets if he wasn't marching. He didn't flinch or break his stride. He took over spaces he occupied, spreading out in chairs when seated and habitually propping his shoes on things with jaunty irreverence. Vain about his appearance, the dashing Montgomery usually found a way to violate military dress

regulations to suit his fancy. When in tropical uniform and mixing among his men, he would roll up his sleeves high above his elbows and bare his muscular tattooed forearms, looking more like a hardnosed scallywag of a soldier than one of the British Army's polished general officers. He had pale, sharp blue eyes that reflected a forceful spirit and, a bit like those of T.E. Lawrence, looked even more striking when he was bronzed by the desert sun. He spoke with a naturally resonant deep voice that if he were barking orders or, heaven forbid, had reason to yell, became as cutting as the crack of a whip. Despite his polished accent he was fond of flavouring his speech with slang and the parlance of an average British soldier. He had a roguish sense of humour and smiled often. His sharp, moustachioed grin was boisterous enough to light up a room.

Monty was a fiery star among generals – a buccaneer. His warlike exuberance was not the norm for British generals and sometimes ruffled the average Englishman, although Monty's fellow Anglo-Irishman Sir Alan Brooke, then Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), understood him fine and worked well with him. Monty himself had long since learned not to care about others' opinions and was unrepentantly true to his nature. He often derived slightly wicked delight from annoying people.

At this time in his life, Monty was especially hard-edged and hungry for a fight. He was not the cheery character later seen in wartime publicity images. Photos and film reels from this early period in North Africa show him looking fierce and downright baleful as he acclimatized himself to leading the Eighth Army. Monty had been training and preparing for this war literally for years, and also had more than a few scores to settle with the Germans. He had lost all his earthly possessions. The previous year, the German Luftwaffe had bombed Portsmouth, destroying his home and leaving him, as he later said, with nothing but a roll of bedding and two suitcases. 'I may say I got me own back on the German afterwards', he would quip with informal impudence in 1964. That retribution was yet to come. Apart from being left homeless and bereft of belongings, Monty had previously been a commander within the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) unceremoniously driven off the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940. He had not forgotten it, nor had he forgotten the loss of the entire 51st Highland

Division to Rommel at St. Valery in 1940. Montgomery had a proud spirit and the events at Dunkirk had left him feeling particularly humiliated. He had been forced to back down, which was anathema to him, and retreat back to England. He would mention 'avenging Dunkirk' numerous times in his writings and speeches, which is an indicator how much the retreat stung him and left him with payback on the brain. War was always personal for Monty – a competition, in which he would do everything he could to learn about his opponents' psyche and personality so as to defeat them. This time there was also revenge involved – not only national revenge, but private revenge. Nobody would chase Bernard Montgomery off a beach and get away with it. Monty didn't just want to win against the Germans. He wanted to utterly smash his enemies and rub their noses in their defeat.

He was eager to take on Rommel. All the other generals before him had dropped like flies against this seemingly unbeatable German commander. That was just the kind of challenge Monty loved. To achieve this victory would be even more immensely satisfying for him than usual: here was an opportunity to restore British honour in North Africa, to take his much-desired revenge, and to attain, with manly pride, the unforgettable distinction of being the lone warrior to lift the Arthurian sword of victory from the stone of defeat and vanquish Rommel. Montgomery was primed and eager to jump into the ring. He had already been plotting Rommel's doom during his journey to Cairo, studying maps, reviewing intelligence and meticulously analyzing everything. As far as Monty was concerned, Rommel was not the Desert Fox anymore – he was a sitting duck. Monty was the predator in this equation, and he could hardly wait to come to grips with this appealing new prey.

Although Egypt seemed to be going to hell around his ears when he first got there, Monty was confident he could turn the situation around. In any case he was prepared to literally die on the spot rather than let Rommel have his way anymore. He was just the right man for the new job.

The Rommel Problem

Alongside the myth of Auchinleck's mastery of the Egyptian crisis, much has been said in post-war literature to credit Rommel's eventual defeat entirely to the Royal Air Force – a view which originated and persisted in large part primarily due to the claims of Air Marshals Tedder and Coningham, who shared not only the name Arthur but also a lofty derision for soldiers as a breed of inferior 'land lubbers'. Both of them disliked Monty and spread detractions about his abilities. In North Africa they fuelled what Brooke described as 'many rumours afloat that Monty was far too sticky, that he only thought of his own reputation, would never take risks, played for certainties, etc., etc.'. According to Brooke: 'I discovered that these rumours emanated from the two airmen, Coningham and Tedder, who were responsible for the air support. I felt convinced that they were unjustified … I found on several occasions in the war that airmen, entirely disconnected with the administrative problems of supply, which were mainly done for them, and with the very vaguest of conceptions as to the requirements of land tactics, were only too free in offering criticisms and accusing the Army of moving too slowly.' The RAF had indeed managed to harass Rommel and make his situation more difficult, but by mid-1942 they hadn't got rid of him either – nor could they hope to without land forces to spearhead the deathblow.

It would take an army to defeat Rommel: the Eighth Army, to be precise, and that was in sorrier shape than ever when Monty arrived. Ragged, bearded, dishevelled, and defeated, the men continued to display the appearance of Biblical wanderers and the attitude of island castaways. They had been chased all over the desert, at times literally in circles. They had watched their comrades be shot or burned to death in tanks, and seen corpses of friend and foe alike teem with flies and blister in the sun. They had shed blood for barren patches of land only to have the territory snatched from them again. They had suffered, and continued to suffer, in a pointless manner as far as they could tell. General after general had appeared and attempted to hearten them with rousing words, only to crumble before Rommel and subsequently be stripped of command.

The man responsible for the administrative bloodletting was Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who was utterly fed up with the embarrassing

North African situation. Churchill has been criticized for being so harsh as to fire his generals in short order, but a closer inspection of his decisions in light of events shows that – much like US President Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War, who also fired a litany of generals – he only did so after having given them every opportunity to succeed, and his ultimate decisions to fire them were canny, well-timed and entirely justified.

Churchill possessed a shrewd sense of vision. Apart from the British Army's failure to dislodge the resilient Rommel from North Africa, with all the military problems and potential strategic risks that entailed, he could see that the British Empire was being shamed on the world stage by the endless fumbling in the desert. The Nazis were successfully painting themselves as 'supermen' in propaganda using the brush of Rommel's cheeky triumphs – broadcasting his most mundane feats in newsreels and plastering his photos all over posters and magazines – while British generals could apparently do nothing but be flummoxed. They would make a grab at Rommel and he would disappear, then suddenly pop up, pull the wool over their eyes and knock them backwards; they would dash towards him, only for him to dodge and chase them off. The mad capers going on in the Sahara were like something out of a farcical cartoon which played out unendingly in newspapers, on newsreel footage and across radios everywhere to the mortified silence of Britain, the nervous lip-biting of America and the ecstatic cheers of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

The British were surprised that Rommel had lasted so long. Indeed it was a testament to his sheer skill that he and his army were still fighting in view of all attempts made to isolate him like a germ and squelch his supplies. Despite every disadvantage, Rommel rallied and continuously snapped at British heels all the way to the brink of the Nile Delta.

For Goebbels' Nazi propaganda machine, Rommel was a godsend – a means by which German supremacy could be asserted and bumbling enemies could be humiliated in one single refrain. Goebbels, who obsessively monitored foreign media reports and practically stalked Churchill from afar, was thrilled about British reactions to Rommel and sought to capitalize on them. When hearing news from Cairo in April 1941

that Wavell was considering abandoning Sidi Barrani, Goebbels wrote: 'One can hardly believe it. But with God and apparently the English everything is possible. The [British Empire] is now undergoing its most difficult endurance test. We'll do everything to see that it fails.' In January 1942, he gloated: 'Rommel is being called a scoundrel in the English press who always pulls a rabbit from a hat … They are making him into one of the most popular generals in the whole world.' At a Nazi Party rally in Linz, Austria to mark the anniversary of Hitler's Anschluss on 15 March 1942, Goebbels made a mockery of how the war was going for the British: '*Herr* Churchill has come up with an extraordinary convenient slogan for this war which always applies. He actually said: I bring you sweat, tears and blood. That always turns out to be true'. The audience reacted to the speech with laughter, enthusiastic cheers and victorious screams of '*Dünkirchen!*' ('Dunkirk!') Calling Rommel's achievements the 'miracle of North Africa', Goebbels adopted a technique of broadcasting the predictions of British public figures from years ago alongside current news in various languages through his propaganda channels to achieve 'stunning effects' on people in other countries and influence views on the war.

The Desert Fox was given his own theme song called *Vorwärts Mit Unserem Rommel* ('Forward With Our Rommel!'). Ostensibly this was an Afrika Korps marching song, but it would also have been played on German public radio and widely disseminated, as this was how the Propaganda Ministry functioned; music with simple melodies and political lyrics was spread everywhere to influence public sentiments and build concepts in popular memory. Apart from hailing German prowess at blazing across the Sahara and comparing Rommel's name to an advancing drumbeat, the lyrics took many stabs at the British: 'We are the German Afrika Korps, the Führer's daring troops! Forward we storm like the devil, putting salt in the Tommies' soup!' It also asserted: 'The British fear us like the plague, they are sitting on hot coals! … As Churchill and Roosevelt burn with wrath, we cast enemies back in every land!' Apparently to avoid a diplomatic incident, Goebbels threw the Italians a bone in the last stanza – although notably this supposed act of generosity saw Mussolini's troops literally referred to as a 'flock' marching alongside the Germans; the same

word in German is usually used to refer to a herd of animals, usually sheep. In addition to being disseminated on German radio, a vast majority of Nazi propaganda songs were translated into foreign languages and disseminated across numerous clandestine radio stations that Goebbels had set up to reach people in many countries including Great Britain, America and across Europe. He recognized the potential of getting a good tune to stick in people's heads. This seemed to be a time for swan songs hailing the end of Britain's army in North Africa.

The Man Who Would Fight

The lack of a definitive solution to the Rommel problem was bad on every level. Churchill aimed, rightly, to find a commander with the ingenuity and stamina to beat Rommel at his own game. He needed a man who could go out and tackle Rommel head-on without fear – and above all win, not only to salvage the military situation and change the tenor of the war, but to restore Britain's dignity on a global scale. None of the previous generals had proved up to the task despite every effort of Churchill to invest in and believe in them. They lacked the drive, the energy and the killer instinct required. Churchill needed to find a hard scrapper as Lincoln had once found in Ulysses S. Grant, of whom he could also say: 'I cannot spare this man. He fights.'

Fortunately the CIGS Brooke knew such a scrapper: his fellow Ulsterman, Bernard Law 'Monty' Montgomery. A soldier through and through, the rugged and rakish Monty was as flamboyant as Blackbeard the Pirate but wholly systematic and reliable especially when something needed subduing, organizing or killing. Brooke was wont to put him in dangerous hotspots. When pondering how to prepare for a possible German invasion of south-east England, he put Monty in command there, as he believed Monty would be the best man to handle any trouble and face down a Nazi landing. Monty had previously distinguished himself in fighting against rebels in Ireland and quelling an insurgency in Palestine.

Monty was not initially in the running for the North African job. Brooke had become thoroughly disillusioned with Auchinleck's abilities and

identified Monty early on as a suitable commander for the Eighth Army. Churchill initially favoured a different contender named Gott, but destiny changed constantly throughout the desert war and would place Monty in command. Throughout early 1942 Auchinleck, nicknamed 'the Auk', had been frustrating and alarming both Brooke and Churchill with indecisiveness and strange theories he expressed in telegrams which were out of touch with strategic aims. Brooke found that the Auk was overconfident and trusted too much in abstract theories about Rommel based on military intelligence reports. He had lost Benghazi to Rommel, which Brooke described as 'nothing less than bad generalship on the part of Auchinleck'. The continuous waffling of Auchinleck was similar in some ways to the lengthy vacillation of US Army General George B. MacClellan during the American Civil War, although Churchill had far less patience than Lincoln.

Britain's forceful Prime Minister had a sharp eye for talent and, finding Auchinleck gravely wanting, was ready to sack him without further ado – much to the exasperation of Brooke who hoped the Auk's latent talents might eventually bloom if given a bit more proverbial water and sunshine. 'It is very exhausting, this continual protecting of Auchinleck, especially as I have not got the highest opinion of him!' Brooke fumed in his diary on 24 March 1942. However, it wasn't long before Brooke came to realize based on independent observation that Churchill's assessment was in fact right. Auchinleck, at the time also the Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East in addition to being commander of the Eighth Army, further alarmed both Brooke and Churchill by sending a message in July 1942 recommending his chief of staff General Thomas Corbett to take control of the Eighth Army. Corbett was a very small and inexperienced fish drawn from the pond of the Indian Army and could barely function as the chief of staff, let alone command an army in combat. Brooke would not hear of it. Brooke correctly believed that command of the Eighth Army 'would require someone like Montgomery, bounding with self-confidence and capable of instilling this confidence in those under his command'.

Travelling to Cairo, Brooke met with Auchinleck and was surprised that the latter agreed to the suggestion of having Monty assume control of the

Eighth Army. ‘I had expected some opposition, but I felt some serious doubts as to whether an Auk-Monty combination would work’, wrote Brooke. ‘I felt that the Auk would interfere too much with Monty, would ride him on too tight a rein, and would consequently be liable to put him out of his stride. As I was very anxious to put Monty in command of the 8th Army, I felt this might necessitate moving the Auk to some other command … ‘

After Auchinleck’s removal from command that summer, the next man selected to come up to bat against Rommel was Lieutenant General William ‘Strafer’ Gott. Although Monty was Brooke’s first choice, Churchill picked Gott. This was due not only to recommendations from friends in high places, but also to the fact that Gott seemed pluckier than the past batch of stodgy generals and was more than a little familiar with the Saharan crisis. Having been there since before the war started, he witnessed the Triassic era of Italy’s failed 1940 conquest and the advent of Rommel’s Axis messiah. This very familiarity worked against him. Gott was just as exhausted and demoralized as the other soldiers of the Eighth Army. He confided to Brooke that he did not want to step into the shoes of high command in this theatre of the war. He wanted a rest.

Unfortunately for Gott, the only rest he would experience in the near future would be eternal. As the plane carrying him from the battleground to his new unwanted job came in for a landing on the outskirts of Cairo on 7 August 1942, the German Luftwaffe appeared with perfect timing for an attack – which came as a shock to the British, given that the Luftwaffe had never before made such a bold incursion so close to the Nile metropolis. Some said later only a single German plane shot the 44-year-old Gott down by ‘accident’ or coincidence. His pilot, Squadron Leader Hugh James, managed a crash landing and barely escaped badly burned from the aircraft. James insisted until his dying day that he saw no less than six Messerschmitt Bf 109s, which seemed to have been hovering in wait. He said the Luftwaffe had circled back to shoot the grounded aircraft as if to ensure all aboard were dead. Only four people escaped with their lives, while eighteen, including Gott, were killed. James believed Gott had been deliberately murdered. Axis intelligence services at the time were

intercepting reports about British activities sent by American official Bonner Fellers to Washington, DC from Cairo. Although this information leak was quickly 'plugged' with Fellers' removal not long after Gott's death, it was still ongoing at the time of the attack on the aircraft. The description of the Germans shooting up the aircraft on the ground in an extra effort to get rid of survivors indicates they definitely wanted someone on board dead and points more to a planned assassination prompted by German intelligence than a 'fortunate accident' for Nazi Germany. The British government publicly downplayed the death as an accident.

Brooke later expressed that good ultimately came from this tragedy in the form of Monty's appointment to command the Eighth Army. Faced yet again with the lack of an appropriately aggressive general to take on Rommel, Churchill placed his trust in Brooke's strong recommendation to hand the Eighth Army to the most audacious and resilient fighting man he knew: Monty.

Forging A New Army

When Montgomery first arrived at Eighth Army HQ, he was initially in a feisty frame of mind and ready to get to work. He was disgusted by the conditions he found. 'The sight that met me was enough to lower anyone's morale', he wrote, noting that everyone was milling outside in a state of apathetic squalor. He learned that Auchinleck had forbidden his administrative officers to use tents. 'Everyone was to be as uncomfortable as possible, so that they wouldn't be more comfortable than the men', observed Monty with disdain.

The place was overrun with flies which revolted the tidy Monty. Swarms of flies had become trapped in a mosquito net that was supposedly intended to protect the outdoor lunch table from them. The flies of the North African desert cannot be compared to the average modest housefly. They are rather more like what the Egyptians were said to have experienced during the Ten Plagues of Genesis, and indeed they were a plague to anyone unfortunate enough to live among them during the war. They were enormous, buzzed like bees, crawled rapaciously on any surface in range

and were prone to bite anything that looked remotely juicy to them – including not only waste but also dead bodies, and even the lips and eyeballs of living people if they could manage to reach them. The Australians had developed some creative ways of trying to ward off these pests, such as walking around with long fringes of cloth hanging from their headgear so that they could shake their heads like horses to keep the flies away from them; with their heads and faces thus totally covered with fringe veils, they modelled a very strange fashion. Other soldiers wore nets over their heads and left the flies to crawl over the rest of their half-naked bodies since it was too hot to cover the rest of themselves up. With no tent to retreat to, Monty roasted in the sun and ate his lunch among a buzzing cloud of flies, during which time he did what he called 'some savage thinking'. Monty could indeed be quite savage when he was riled up. Things were about to change radically.

Monty's effect on the Eighth Army was something like electroshock therapy. He wasted no time in getting down to business – which meant getting into everybody's business, and straightening things out with a ferocious zeal that could be both inspiring and terrifying. The men were naturally jaded at first. They had seen plenty of generals come and go. Their initial stoic scepticism wouldn't last long. Like Rommel, Monty, too, was everywhere. He made it his business to know what was going on within his sphere of command and to dominate the details.

Since he had worked previously as a staff officer, Monty knew how to recognize efficient subordinates and was good at handpicking worker bees to effectively do his bidding. His chief of staff was Francis de Guingand, known to Monty as 'Freddie', a former student at the Staff College at Camberley where Monty had taught classes. During this early phase of the war, the two men worked harmoniously. Later on in the war, Freddie's attitude towards his boss changed after certain leading American generals took a more active role. These US generals hectored, undermined and systematically isolated Montgomery due to their own jealousies and to advance their own ambitions. As Monty increasingly found himself criticized for everything he said and did – as is common when people find themselves in a hostile working environment – he felt forced to rely on

Freddie to communicate with the Americans in attempts to secure their cooperation with his plans, which Freddie readily used flattery to accomplish. As time passed, Freddie perceived advantages in running with what he evidently viewed as a stronger pack and toadied to General Dwight Eisenhower and other united rivals of Monty. After the war, the ambitious Freddie got angry at Montgomery for not giving him a promotion he wanted. Freddie would attempt – ludicrously – to take credit for Montgomery's military achievements and cast himself as a type of *kagemusha* political stand-in or 'shadow general' behind Monty's victories, including in North Africa.

It goes without saying that Montgomery was a highly accomplished and experienced career soldier, who in addition to possessing a brilliant military mind was too dominating to be led meekly by the nose by his chief of staff – who aside from being a mere administrator was a decade younger than Monty and with far less knowledge and experience. The exaggerated claims Freddie made about his influence on Monty's military plans, including in North Africa, amounted to nothing more than vindictive attempts at post-war self-aggrandizement. Although Monty was generous – arguably too generous – to Freddie in his memoirs, he would ultimately break off his relationship with his former staff officer who betrayed his trust.

The problems facing the Eighth Army were those that could not be solved by a deskbound general who preferred to work in the quiet of a backroom or needed advisors to tell him what to do, nor the type who could only function in a 'set-piece' environment as Montgomery has been accused of. Monty was a fighter and a firebrand. He understood the problems the soldiers of the Eighth Army were facing precisely because he was the type of general who wanted to be near the front and had a real heart for the men. The first thing he did after taking command was to go out into the desert, where he saw the grimy faces, the dirty windswept hair and ragged uniforms, and most of all the hollow hopelessness in the men's eyes. Monty never allowed himself to become so isolated in high command that he could not meet an ordinary soldier and understand what was on the man's mind. He knew exactly what these men were feeling, because he had felt it too as a combat veteran himself – and he knew how to fix it.

‘The soldier has to be kept active, alert and purposeful all the time. He will do anything you ask of him so long as you arrange he gets his mail from home, the newspapers, and, curiously enough, plenty of tea’, wrote Monty.

Monty was also very astute and industrious. He knew that this type of deep-seated disillusionment plaguing the Eighth Army couldn’t be cured by a ‘bread and circuses’ type of approach, such as showering the troops with supply goodies, posturing in front of them or making rip-roaring speeches. He knew that soldiers were not easily fooled and could fairly size up a general’s worth. He needed to earn the men’s respect, and the men needed to earn confidence in themselves before they were ready to fight Rommel. Monty understood that all the weapons in the world would not be enough to guarantee victory if some soldiers balked at an order to advance or failed to hold part of a line at a critical moment. He had always believed that morale was the single most important factor in war. Now a real test faced him. Morale in the Eighth Army wasn’t just bad; it was non-existent. He didn’t need to improve it. He needed to create it from nowhere. To get this army energized and mould it into a cohesive and capable fighting force would be no easy task. It would be one of the biggest, and most rewarding, challenges in Monty’s life. And as always, he was ready to meet the challenge head-on.

The first thing to go was the dirtiness. Monty hated being dirty and disliked seeing other people in a grimy condition. He moved his army to an encampment where there was more fresh air and less flies. He made it clear that flies would not be tolerated, and went everywhere armed with a flywhisk which he wielded with alacrity. He obtained better food for the troops, and demanded that his men use utensils for eating. Suddenly things ran on schedule. There was no more sulking in holes in the ground nor shuffling around with mangy beards or scruffy hair.

Nor was there any more talk of how to escape or hide from Rommel. The recently sacked Auchinleck, ever prepared to compromise with Rommel, had accepted the notion that the Desert Fox might make it past the current line of British defences near El Alamein and had created emergency plans for withdrawal in such a case. Monty was having none of it. He was outraged about the plans and especially that a general tasked with fighting

should have mentally accepted the possibility of defeat. To the astonishment of army staff, Montgomery ordered all emergency withdrawal plans to be destroyed – 'to be burnt', to be precise. Whether these discarded plans all went up in smoke is unclear, but the ferocious Montgomery certainly wanted to see them in flames, and he told as much to the entire Eighth Army. Once he came across soldiers digging a defensive trench and, after learning what the men were doing, sharply ordered them to throw their shovels away. 'You'll never need them', declared Monty.

The men of the Eighth Army soon found themselves exercising furiously, literally running across the desert in laps and practicing manoeuvres. Montgomery, who rigorously maintained his own top physical fitness, liked to go jogging among the troops himself. He also forced his staff to get moving; his reluctant office workers had to run relays up and down stairs. An active army was one that could fight well and didn't have time to waste on moping or gloomy thoughts.

'The troops must be brought to a state of wild enthusiasm before the operation begins', wrote Monty. 'They must have that offensive eagerness and that infectious optimism that comes from physical wellbeing. They must enter the fight with the light of battle in their eyes and definitely wanting to kill the enemy.'

Montgomery drove everyone hard and kept them on their toes. The men began to feel as though they were part of a proper army and strived to meet new goals. Their confidence increased as they succeeded. However, not everybody was thrilled with the Montgomery Olympics. One ageing colonel protested to Monty that his heart couldn't take the exertions and tried to use a doctor's note to escape. In response, the impertinent Monty retorted that everybody had to die at some point and to die while jogging would be a fine way to go. Monty relished the look of shock on the man's face and wrote wryly that the reluctant jogger survived both the war and his exercise regimen.

Brooke and Churchill visited Monty not long after he took command, and he made a fine impression. 'He [Monty] is in tremendous form, delighted at being sent out here, and gave me a wonderful feeling of relief at having got him out here', wrote Brooke.

Monty personally introduced himself to all of the troops. He demonstrated excellent leadership ability in the empathy he showed them and his ability to build trust. He made promises to the men that they could expect him to deliver on. There would be no more running away. Rommel was not going to have his way anymore because they simply were not going to let him. No matter what happened, the Eighth Army – so weary from running around the desert – was not going to budge. Monty famously told them: 'If we cannot stay here alive, then let us stay here dead.' His main points were clear and succinct. He also made it clear to the men that he was going to look after them, make sure they had everything they needed and would always keep them well-informed about what their mission objectives were. Monty believed knowledge was power. He was talented at communicating his plans so every soldier within his army understood what his particular role was in a given battle.

Montgomery looked after his men with genuine compassion. He made sure they had good living conditions and were well-supplied, had access to news and letters from home, got their cigarettes, and knew they were personally appreciated. The troops came to love Monty not only because he was a zesty and tough character but because he treated them with understanding, kindness and respect.

Patience As A Virtue

Churchill was brimming with optimism when Monty took command. The first thing he wanted to see was Monty and his Eighth Army charging out into the desert to cross swords with Rommel. He believed the time was right for an epic clash of arms. But Churchill was impatient because he was looking at the situation through the lenses of someone who had been disappointed time and time again over a long period and was eager to see some glimmer of hope. Reality on the ground was not conducive to an immediate attack. He wanted an August attack – essentially he was eager for Monty to sally forth right after arriving.

Realistically, the Eighth Army needed some work. Rommel had chewed up this army and spat it across the desert in pieces. Monty had to forge a

brand new ‘fighting machine’, as he called it, from the tattered material he had to work with. Every military commander worth his salt knows that, whether he is leading a small or a large unit, soldiers need to be trained until this training becomes such a physical and mental part of them that they react instinctively. They need to learn to move and act in harmony with each other. They need to be hardened to all types of stress and perform unrelentingly. The troops were just beginning to see the fruits of Monty’s reforms in mid-September 1942 and they still had a fair way to go. ‘I had promised the Eighth Army on arrival that I would not launch our offensive till we were ready. I could not be ready until October’, wrote Monty.

Aside from having its confidence destroyed by Rommel, the Eighth Army was all over the map in terms of its abilities – literally. Its troops came from many diverse countries including Poland, France, Greece, New Zealand, Australia, India and from regions all over Great Britain. Many new recruits had also joined. Nobody had bothered training these men as part of a cohesive whole. ‘It is essential to understand that all men are different. The miners from Durham and Newcastle, the men from the Midlands, the Cockneys, the farmers from the West Country, the Scot, the Welshman – all are different. Some men are good at night; others prefer to fight in daylight. Some are best at the fluid and mobile battle; others are more temperamentally suited to the solid killing match in close country. Therefore all divisions are different’, wrote Monty, adding that a commander needed to get to know the individual spirit of each of his divisions. ‘Once I had grasped this essential fact of difference, I used to match the troops to the job; having studied the conditions of any particular battle which was impending, I would employ in it divisions whose men were best suited to those conditions, and preferred them.’

Monty didn’t want to go to battle without ensuring that the army was fit to fight in every way, and he delayed action against Churchill’s wishes. There was disunity, disillusionment and all-round disarray that needed a deep cleaning to get rid of. When Churchill attempted to force the issue, Monty offered to quit or be fired. That settled things in Monty’s favour.

‘The British people … wanted real success; for too long they had seen disaster or at best only partial success’, Monty wrote. ‘But to gain complete

success we must have time; we had to receive a quantity of new equipment, and we had to get the army trained to use it, and also rehearsed in the tasks which lay ahead.'

Meanwhile Montgomery had spent a great deal of time scrutinizing his opponent, Rommel. He realized this situation was not a matter of supplies or attrition. By studying Rommel from a psychological perspective, he got to know things about the German general that mere Ultra intelligence could not tell him. He looked at patterns in Rommel's behaviour. He studied the dispositions of Rommel's troops and noticed that every Italian unit had German units placed nearby for backup in what Monty called 'pocketing'. It was an indicator to Monty that Rommel lacked complete confidence in the Italian troops. Those became weak spots Monty would aim for.

Analysing Rommel's past battles and decisions, he also picked up on Rommel's preference for improvisation and 'playing' with opponents out in the wilderness. He realized that Rommel wanted interaction. He liked to lure people out and then tussle with them. It was in those tussles that Rommel could react spontaneously to exploit weakness, unbalance his opponents and excel. After having studied Rommel's past successes, 'it seemed to me that what Rommel liked was to get our armour to attack him; he then disposed of his own armour behind a screen of anti-tank guns, knocked out our tanks, and finally had the field to himself', Monty wrote.

Therefore Monty, domineering by nature, arrived at a highly unconventional conclusion. He wasn't going to move. If Rommel's preference was to fight a mobile battle, then the only answer was to be immobile and start to pull the rug out from under Rommel's army that way. 'I would not allow our tanks to rush out at him', wrote Monty, adding, 'We would fight a static battle and my forces would not move.'

The bottom line for Monty was his determination not to 'cooperate' or have a 'conversation' with Rommel in any way. There would be no more desert follies or chases. Montgomery would set the tone and in a manner that Rommel was unprepared for. No matter how much Rommel tried to draw him out, Monty would sit there like a stubborn rock, gathering his strength until Rommel let his guard down. Then Monty would lunge and knock the German's proverbial block off. The blow would have to be a

grand one – a real deathblow. Monty wasn't interested in a sporting battle of wits or a chess gambit. He wanted to upset the table and throw the Germans clear off the chessboard.

Montgomery's sheer forcefulness during the Second World War has led, incongruously, to accusations of him being exceedingly cautious – as though the powerful methods he sometimes preferred to use were a sign of weakness. Instead, Monty's concentration of force and the aggressive manner in which he unleashed it show his ruthlessness and intense focus on devastating his enemies. In terms of planning battles, Monty wasn't the type of general who preferred the touch of pearl-handled revolvers – Monty was the kind who wielded a shotgun. A shotgun might not be a showy weapon but it's unquestionably an equalizer. It is direct and devastatingly powerful. It takes no prisoners.

That wasn't the sum of Montgomery's ability. He was capable of adapting to fight using different means, as his other experiences including in pre-war Palestine, as well as in Italy in 1943 and in the Ardennes in 1945, show. He preferred to take control and keep it when possible since he always wanted to make enemies dance to his tune alone. He had to eject Rommel completely from the vicinity of the Nile Delta and prevent him from ever regaining the initiative.

The First Clash

During this time, Monty correctly predicted that Rommel, picking up a false but familiar scent of caution and indecision, would try to get the game moving again by taking a poke at him. That had worked well for Rommel in the past. One poke with his Panzers had sometimes been enough to send the British scattering like moths in various directions and had given birth to maelstroms of battle. Fully expecting Rommel to make a stab at the Eighth Army – and having his suspicions confirmed by Ultra intelligence reports – Monty warned his troops that the enemy was going to surface and not to worry. They would rebuff Rommel in short order. It would not be a crisis or entail a huge effort. That is what Montgomery intended, and that is what happened at the Battle of Alam Halfa from 30 August to 5 September 1942.

For Rommel, Alam Halfa was a chance to reel the enemy back in and get cracking on towards Cairo again. He needed a weakness, any weakness, to exploit. Rommel had 34,000 German soldiers at his disposal plus additional Italian divisions. Supplies were still reaching him – albeit slowly and not as much as his army needed to fight effectively. He had also made use of what Monty later described as a 'considerable' amount of captured British supplies during his advance from Gazala to Alamein. However Rommel knew his resources were not infinite and had persistently been badgering Italian and German authorities to act immediately to resolve his supply crisis, and had received guarantees from Italian Marshal Ugo Cavallero and German Field Marshal Albert Kesselring on this matter.

Cavallero was a slippery character who at times worked against Rommel but also appeared to be accommodating towards him. That was Cavallero's way with most people, and everything depended on the circumstances. A member of the Italian aristocracy, he had bobbed in and out of the army whenever it suited him, became a zealous fascist at a time when it was most convenient and had worn the hats of Mussolini's undersecretary of war, senator and business entrepreneur. With a gift for flattery, a perennial smirk, and large dark eyes that always seemed to peer furtively from behind his large round spectacles, Cavallero was perpetually keen to succeed. Shortly after the Germans stepped into North Africa, he created a key position for himself by getting Mussolini to buy into his plan for a new *Comando Supremo*. This would be a reorganized and more centralized form of Italy's armed forces' high command with Cavallero in the starring role as the necessary supreme commander. It also placed him in a prime role as an intermediary between Germany and Italy. Both Rommel and Mussolini found themselves bewildered by Cavallero as he habitually told different things to different people with apparent earnestness. Ciano hated Cavallero, referring to him in his diaries as a 'crook' and a 'liar'. Later on when Italy was plunged into turmoil in 1943, Cavallero would attempt to perform another balancing act, denying his former loyalty to Mussolini and courting the affections of the Germans. His luck would ultimately run out as he ended up being shot by an unknown entity who was likely tired of his political duplicity. Cavallero's deceit seems to have

drastically impacted communications between Rommel and Italian authorities during the North African campaign. Writings by Ciano and Rommel show that Cavallero failed to relay Rommel's concerns to Rome and consistently downplayed the impact of Rommel's supply crisis to Ciano and Mussolini.

Kesselring served as Germany's commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean sphere of the war (*Oberbefehlshaber Süd*). He, too, was a slippery character anxious to advance his career by pleasing his political overlords. In contrast to many German commanders, Kesselring managed to dip his fingers in both the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe pies, and wield a great deal of influence within both spheres. Another striking contrast was the manner in which Kesselring posed for photographs. The vast majority of German officers tried to affect a serious look when being photographed. Kesselring set himself apart by his proclivity to bare a broad, toothy grin. A native of South Germany – Bavaria, to be precise – Kesselring, like Rommel, was another general that offered Hitler an alternative to consulting the Prussian military elite.

Kesselring and Rommel could not have been more different. Kesselring was fiercely loyal to the Nazi regime and anxious to please Hitler at any cost. He proved capable of committing monstrosities on demand when his masters wanted. He had ordered the bombing of Rotterdam and was later responsible for massacring Italian civilians. Any disagreements Kesselring had with other German commanders were about technicalities rather than moral problems, and he could easily get over these disagreements as long as all parties were marching to the same Nazi drum. He didn't raise issues about matters of conscience. He was more than willing to sacrifice troops if Hitler asked. The incorrigibly rational Rommel wrote that he believed Kesselring suffered from the problem of 'over-optimism'. That was putting it mildly. What Kesselring had a problem with were actions or even thoughts against Hitler and the Nazi state. He was more than optimistic; he was a true believer in Hitler and wanted to go all-out for 'final victory' no matter the cost. His ideology brought him into conflict with Rommel in North Africa and made him into one of Rommel's bitterest opponents. Ironically Kesselring would later go on to slip out of a post-war death

sentence for war crimes and enjoy a reputational makeover, even leading the Afrika Korps' official veterans group – men who during the war he had insisted go to 'victory or death'. Yet this was conveniently forgotten. It was thanks to Rommel that any Afrika Korps veterans were even alive to see the end of the war. Had Kesselring had his way, they would have died to the last man merely to please Hitler.

As Rommel weighed his options for attacking the Nile Delta, Cavallero assured Rommel that a fuel tanker from Italy would arrive imminently at the end of August, and if it was sunk, other ships already loaded with fuel would sail to him immediately under heavy escort. Kesselring had promised him that Luftwaffe aerial cargo convoys would fly up to 500 tons of fuel per day to the Afrika Korps in an emergency. Cavallero spoke of using submarines and warships to deliver urgently needed supplies. Noting the full moon and seeming unpreparedness of the British, Rommel trusted their guarantees and decided the time was ripe for another attack.

He set up an attack in which one blow aimed for a weak spot in the British mine field to make a breakthrough. The rest of his plan involved elaborate feinting manoeuvres, with his ultimate goal being to pin the British down in one area while he punched a hole through their defences at a different point and poured tanks through the leak to make a run towards the Nile. Intelligence had tipped him off that the Eighth Army was expecting fresh supplies, and he believed this was an ideal opportunity for him to launch his bid to conquer Egypt. He thought he could pull it off. Speed was essential.

Rommel remained determined to take the Suez Canal and thus, as Churchill feared, still posed a powerful threat to British interests. He was a capable and dangerous wild card. Also, in contrast to legends suggesting that Auchinleck and previous British commanders already had him beat, Rommel himself did not feel that a decisive battle had taken place. In letters to his wife as well as his memoirs, Rommel expressed repeatedly that this 'decisive battle' would be his all-out bid to break British forces in Egypt. As of 30 August 1942 he insisted it had not happened yet, but he wanted to change that. He was eager to win, and willing to take more risks.

In keeping with Monty's predictions about his enemy's desire to start a fresh scrambling match, Rommel was bent on provoking the British to move. 'In no circumstances could the battle be allowed to take a static form', Rommel later wrote of his plan. 'With unceasing attacks by smaller units, German-Italian infantry … would tie down large British forces … During this, the decisive battle was planned to take place in the British rear, in such a form that our material weakness would be compensated for by the supreme tactical know-how of our commanders and the better qualities of our troops for battles of movement.'

He claimed that the British would become cut off from their supply depots in Cairo and either be forced to fight to the death or break out west and thus 'give up Egypt', he wrote. To his wife on 30 August, Rommel wrote of his plans to start the 'decisive battle': 'There are such big things at stake. If our blow succeeds, it might go some way towards deciding the whole course of the war.'

Little did Rommel know that the decisive battle he had been anticipating would be crafted by Montgomery and take place on 23 October 1942 during the Second Battle of El Alamein. It would be fought entirely on Monty's terms.

Montgomery had already seen Rommel's moves coming at Alam Halfa and responded to them deftly. This was in part due to Ultra intelligence and mostly due to Monty's skills as a tactician. Other commanders before Monty had obtained advantages due to Ultra intelligence reports yet still managed to lose to Rommel. Monty did not make the same errors. His focus on psychology and human behaviour enabled him to predict and respond quickly to the erratic Rommel. He knew exactly what Rommel was up to. Monty knew that the Eighth Army was forming a wall between Rommel and the Nile, and he had no intention of weakening that wall. Instead he deliberately weakened a spot in the British line to fool Rommel into thinking it was a prime break-in point, and placed his own forces in wait to clobber Axis intruders.

In London, the mood was anxious during the battle as most people there had been more than slightly terrified by Rommel's past successes. Rommel's fearsome reputation was such that even Brooke himself got

nervous the moment that Rommel started fighting. Worried about how Monty was bearing up against this formidable foe, Brooke sent him a kind personal letter during the battle. ‘You have been very much in my thoughts ever since Rommel started his attack. I can so well imagine what all your preoccupations must be and, having seen the ground, almost feel that I am with you’, wrote Brooke to Monty on 3 September. ‘I do wish I could drop in for a talk with you like we did in France. You have got a tough proposition in front of you, but I have the greatest confidence in you.’ This confidence proved well-placed.

With great tactical skill, Monty disposed his forces in such a manner that he did not disrupt or disperse his Eighth Army, but was still able to knock Rommel back with brief, forceful punches and disrupt him temporarily. As Monty drove Rommel off, the RAF pummelled the Axis forces to inflict additional losses on them.

Churchill wanted Monty to press his advantage after Alam Halfa and go all-out to finish Rommel. Monty however was cleverer. He knew that the cunning Rommel, more desperate and determined than ever, was dying to get him out in the open so he could find a lock to pick within the Eighth Army’s forces, exploit a gap in the line and shoot for Cairo. Montgomery refused to be lured out or distracted. He would keep the Eighth Army’s ranks closed and proceed with his master plan. Under no circumstances would he let Rommel have things his way. He preferred to give an impression of being cautious rather put on a show for Churchill. He knew that ignoring Rommel and making his own rules to play by was what would give him the upper hand, and bring decisive victory.

Fooling the Fox

After shoving Rommel back into the desert at Alam Halfa, Monty boldly set out to deceive the Desert Fox himself. He knew Rommel was sizing him up and supposed – correctly – that the other man had assumed he was a cautious type. That suited Monty just fine. Having studied the actions of the past few generals who preceded him, he figured that an imitation game would do the trick. He would simply pretend to be another doddering

fuddy-duddy afraid of dipping a toe the wrong way in the desert. This would get Rommel on the hook. Monty's Eighth Army would mimic that of Auchinleck for a while – it would remain along the El Alamein line, static and sheepish, and appear to bumble around with a construction project.

An amazingly elaborate deception called Operation Bertram took place on Montgomery's orders throughout September and October 1942. To deny Rommel the ability to predict his actions whatsoever, Monty created the illusion that a major attack was being planned to hit an entirely different area south of El Alamein sometime in November. A fake pipeline was conjured up and manned by dummies, along with phantom tanks and vehicles constructed from Egyptian palm branches that were moved around methodically. Intrepid British soldiers regularly relocated and manipulated the dummies to create the illusion of 'progress' on the pipeline – slow progress, to be sure. The Germans failed to see through Monty's trickery. Meanwhile Monty successfully concealed the Eighth Army's busy training exercises and had the true locations of his tanks and vehicles hidden with artful camouflage.

Rommel himself was totally deceived. He wrongly underestimated Monty as an overcautious type. He sincerely believed the British were pottering around and working themselves gradually up to an eventual attack in November, by which time Rommel hoped to be more ready for them. He would later harp resentfully in his memoirs that his eventual defeat at El Alamein was entirely due to a supply crisis and gave Monty no credit for duping or surprising him – which was rather unsportsmanlike of the usually genial Rommel, considering he had been willing to compliment past foes. Rommel minimized Monty's abilities in his writings, particularly in North Africa. These statements diminishing Montgomery's generalship were published in English in the 1950s and are oft repeated by historians. However Rommel's assessment of Monty in North Africa as a 'timid' general whose success was due entirely to supplies and the efforts of his predecessors is not an impartial one and fails to take into account many facts about the clashes the two men had in Africa. Rommel's statements were clearly coloured by his bitterness about his losses and how things turned out.

‘The Devil’s Gardens’

To protect his army from enemy attacks, Rommel had cleverly wedged himself between the Qattara Depression – a steep defile that contained a salt sea impassable for vehicles – and a deadly minefield. This minefield, dubbed ‘the Devil’s Gardens’ by German troops, was five miles deep, 40 miles long, and contained several million mines and booby traps. The Germans added upwards of an estimated 500,000 lethal mines to new areas in addition to minefields they had captured from the British, and created explosive booby traps from captured British bombs and munitions. Some of these bomb traps were wired to explode through electrical detonation.

Rommel’s thinking was that the salt sea was too rough going for tanks and nobody would dare cross the minefield, making his position relatively safe. He assumed he could remain in this spot and use it as a launch pad to seize Alexandria and Cairo. Due to his own tendencies to target or bypass his opponents’ flanks, Rommel was hypersensitive of enemy movements near his own flanks and frequently stuck his army into difficult areas where it could nest safely without the risk of another force sneaking up on it.

Rommel was highly cautious whenever he felt vulnerable. He taught his men concealment and dispersal techniques, and relied on camouflage to hide his troops. Sometimes he waited for sandstorms and blowing dust before ordering his troops to move so as to hide them from the enemy. A trademark approach of the engineering-orientated Rommel was the use of mines, booby traps, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to protect territory gained from enemy incursion or prevent his forces from being attacked or pursued. These explosives were not only meant to harm the enemy, but to cause psychological horror to discourage his foes from taking any action.

Even as a young man Rommel had preferred to bluff his opponents; the installation of mines was one way of bluffing them into thinking it was impossible to get at him. For his ‘Devil’s Gardens’, Rommel encouraged his men to be creative in planting explosives. He wanted things to be both lethal and unpredictable. The Germans created a truly ugly death field filled with varied types and patterns of mines. Many of these were S-mines (or

the *Schützenmine* 42) also known as the Schü-mine 41 or the ‘Shoe mine’. They were cheaply made, easy to get and easy to construct. What made the S-mines especially horrible was that they were chiefly made of wood and barely contained any metal at all, which made them extremely difficult to sense with metal detectors. Another thing that made them difficult to detect was their very small size. Used later in north-western Europe with gruesome effects, the S-mines had their true heyday in North Africa where swirling sand and barren landscapes made them even easier to conceal and therefore especially devastating. The Teller mine, whose name literally meant ‘plate mine’ in German, was a broad and powerful anti-tank mine the size of a dinner plate that resembled an Olympic discus. Encased in metal, Teller mines were deceptively thin and almost looked harmless; their size and shape allowed them to be easily carried around and attached to different objects in a testament to refined German engineering. For all their thinness, the amount of explosive force that a single Teller mine could unleash in seconds was massive and absolutely horrific. They were designed to take out tanks with a single burst, and thus their effects on human beings were atrocious. The Teller mine proved to be a favourite device of Rommel, who devised different methods of attaching them to various objects and fortifications to rip up enemy troops and vehicles. In addition to elaborate patterns of S-mines and Teller mines, the Germans also rigged up unique explosives, including 250lb aerial bombs with trigger mechanisms attached. All of these devices would indeed take a grisly toll on British troops during the coming hard fight.

The ‘gardens’ gave Rommel a large measure of confidence. He didn’t think anybody would, or could, get across – at least not without him being alerted early on and able to respond. To make even surer that nobody could sneak up on his position, he had patrol dogs posted outside along his perimeter with German sentries at night to alert them to potential lurkers in the distance. However Rommel did not believe that an attack was coming anytime soon. Montgomery, he thought, was just another stick-in-the-mud British general who lacked improvisational talent and was easy to predict.

Rommel’s Inner Scar

By October 1942, Rommel was seriously ill. His health had been declining for some time and had reached a severe stage by this point. Some German military officials noticed that his symptoms seemed to become worse with the stress of his army's situation and, in those days when the ideal soldier in Hitler's Germany was an invincible 'superman', derisively accused Rommel of having a nervous breakdown due to mental or emotional problems.

Rommel, then age 50, was indeed physically ill. He insisted on living in the same conditions as his frontline troops, denying himself any extra comforts or extra food. This took a toll on him as a general. Given their heavy responsibilities, generals need time to rest and to think; they have a different role than their men. Living among the men non-stop in harsh conditions, doing physical labour among the troops, and acting as a 'point man' causes undue stress to a man tasked with leading a whole army. Even in ancient times, generals gave themselves a place to withdraw from the hustle of the army and rest up to plot their next moves. Rommel's obstinate refusals to set himself apart from his men in any way was counterproductive and caused him to become over-exhausted.

Despite his toughness and high level of physical fitness, life in the desert environment had taken its toll on Rommel since he first arrived in 1941. He had caught jaundice and sustained liver damage. Although he had hoped that the North African climate would improve his arthritis, this condition continued to become worse seasonally in the autumn. As he lived among his troops, Rommel's lifestyle was typical of an infantryman in a sustained combat environment; he wore filthy clothes, rarely took his boots off and once caught a bad case of boils that cracked into open sores visible on his face and neck in propaganda film reels and photos. He and his men ate the same food. Apart from the grim tins of blubbery meat and hard pieces of black bread provided to them, they scavenged from captured British rations, hunted and killed wild animals including gazelles for meals, bartered with Bedouins for provisions and drank from desert wells. As of mid-1942 Rommel was suffering from a bad case of nasal diphtheria, a bacterial disease often caused by living in unsanitary conditions.

Yet people around him were correct in sensing a psychological element to his weakened condition at this point in the war. Although Rommel was not mentally unbalanced nor emotionally unstable as his political rivals maliciously claimed, he was in fact suffering from a lingering condition that had afflicted him during the First World War and which he had never been able to cure. Rommel had recurring insomnia. This was a chronic problem for Rommel and had been since his early combat experiences in his youth. As a young man he described having what he called 'horrific' nightmares during the First World War. He had so much trouble trying to fall asleep that he eventually stopped trying. During that war, the young Rommel had tried to stay awake and keep fighting and working as long as possible. Stressful situations made him more hyperactive. Things would get to a point when he simply 'crashed' – his body would give out from exhaustion after days with no sleep and he would fall unconscious. That became the norm for him. He deliberately avoided sleeping and would just let himself pass out. He remained haunted by his first war in many ways; it is possible the nightmares never went away. In any case, he would exhibit the very same pattern of behaviour during the Second World War. His private letters indicate that sleep remained a major problem for him. He constantly felt the need to report to his wife about his sleep, mentioned surprising occasions when he had managed to sleep, and above all to make various excuses for why he was not sleeping. In France and North Africa, sometimes Rommel would work on a mere two or three hours of sleep a night. Clearly there was an underlying problem. Rommel's symptoms match those of someone with a severe case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), in which a particular difficulty is the process of falling sleep. Other symptoms can include nightmares and hyperactivity.

The chronic insomnia worsened with stress. This occurred in both world wars. As a young man, the more tense that Rommel became during difficult military situations, the less he was able or willing to rest. The more overactive he became, the harder he would drive himself before 'crashing' in blackouts. He repeated the same behaviour during the Second World War. By August 1942, Rommel had become intensely worried and frustrated about his worsening supply situation, mixed signals from the German High

Command, and half-baked promises from officials in Germany and Italy. As the situation in North Africa became more stressful, Rommel lost any ability to catch any sleep whatsoever. Even his usual snatches of two to three hours' rest were no longer possible for him. He resorted to his usual method of staying active until falling unconscious.

But Rommel was not a young infantryman anymore – he was a Field Marshal leading an army, and others looked to him for strength. As the weary but hyperactive and overstrained Rommel literally lost consciousness in blackouts and fainted on the battlefield, his subordinates were horrified. Reports were made to Germany about the Field Marshal's condition and doctors were sent to inspect him. They found him a wreck who could only command in battle under close medical supervision. Hitler was far from thrilled about this. Although Rommel, who knew better than most people that he could never sleep well anyway, fought all attempts to go on sick leave, he was forced to do so due to Hitler's insistence and concerns from his own staff.

A Forced Intervention

Looking across the desert in September 1942, Rommel was satisfied that the British were not about to try anything. It seemed obvious to him that the new commander, Montgomery, was a late bloomer in terms of action and the British troops were too busy fiddling with their pipeline, which ran south of El Alamein – further convincing Rommel that any attack would occur in that area. It was then October and Rommel didn't expect any attempted nastiness on the part of the British until November. If there was a perfect time to take leave, this was it.

Begrudgingly Rommel left North Africa, first visiting Mussolini on 24 September 1942 and then reporting personally to Hitler. Both dictators were optimistic despite Rommel stressing his need for supplies and weapons. Rommel was met with particular enthusiasm in Germany. To emphasise his point about needing more supplies, Rommel and his aides had brought along the casing of a large American-manufactured bomb dropped by a British dive-bomber that had wiped out one of his tank crews. Hitler

seemed to understand his viewpoint and assured Rommel of an imminent turnaround in his army's presently tense situation. Hitler promised him supplies sent via *Siebelfähren* landing craft, which were armed with AA (anti-aircraft) guns and largely invulnerable to torpedoes due to their shallow hulls. He was also promised 40 Tiger tanks, 500 *Nebelwerfer* multiple-rocket launchers and self-propelled guns. During this meeting, Rommel was shown military armament production figures that encouraged him to believe these guarantees were reliable. This gave Rommel some confidence.

Afterwards he began a six-week period of leave at a mountain resort in Semmering, Austria, where he would spend time with his family. Once he was there, he was largely denied contact with the outside world apart from whatever newspapers he could get hold of or radio broadcasts he could listen to. He occasionally received letters from North Africa from his stand-in, General Georg Stumme, about how things were. It had become clear to everyone around Rommel that stress was causing his health to deteriorate and this vacation was intended as a type of 'intervention' recommended by his doctors. The family hoped that isolating stubborn Rommel in this manner would ease his mind and help him relax. It had the opposite effect. Rommel, who did not want to leave the front anyway, became even more agitated when he couldn't get detailed news or have a hand in events there. Ironically his forced exile in the mountains would also make him slightly difficult for German officials to reach when the inevitable crisis occurred.

The 'Hurricane' Is Unleashed

Monty knew very well that he would attack on 23 October 1942, a date he had chosen primarily due to its guaranteed full moon – which would help his engineers carry out his battle plan. Montgomery had a unique flair for both boldness and farsightedness, which he would demonstrate in his military planning throughout the Second World War.

The Second Battle of El Alamein would be one of his finest hours. The battle was a masterpiece. It was bold, ruthlessly effective and masterfully choreographed on a scale never seen before. It was an expression of

Montgomery's ferocity and his extraordinary cunning. Any accusations of caution levelled at Monty are resoundingly disproved by his plans for and actions taken during this offensive. Rommel was horrified on many levels by the ferocity of the battle and referred to it more than once as a 'hurricane'.

While Rommel had presumed that his army was safe behind his 'Devil's Gardens' minefield, Montgomery's daring response was literally to rip up the minefield and go straight through it. Monty opted to strike at the most formidable part of the German defences, a place where he would be least expected. He made this bold blow in the middle of the night, giving his troops eight hours before dawn to clear lanes of up to 24ft wide within the minefield for infantry and tanks to push through, with the tanks advancing in pairs. The men were well-prepared for this task as Monty had been training them relentlessly. After arriving in August, Monty had set up a minefield clearance school where troops from fifty-six different engineer units learned techniques for mine removal. He had also had his troops practice in training areas set up to resemble the German defensive line they would have to get through.

As was his custom, Montgomery made it a priority to get out among the troops and brief them personally on their missions set to occur within the upcoming battle. This would be no First World War-style battle in which soldiers were expected to charge ignorantly into the fray like desperate pawns on a chessboard. Monty wanted a thinking army, and one that trusted its leader. 'An essential feature of my plan was that every commander in the Army, down to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, should know from me personally how I proposed to fight the battle, what issues depended on it, and what were the main difficulties we were likely to encounter', Monty later described. He also gave vent to his own fiery spirit to whip up the troops ahead of the struggle – something he was particularly talented at doing. 'I was determined that the soldiers should go into battle having been worked up into a great state of enthusiasm, and realizing fully what was expected of them', he wrote.

Ahead of the battle, Montgomery issued a rousing message to his troops. With a deliberate nod to one of his favourite heroes since his

boyhood, Admiral Horatio Nelson, he urged ‘every man and every officer enter the battle with a stout heart and with determination to do his duty so long as he has breath in his body’. He added in conclusion: ‘And let no man surrender so long as he is unwounded and can fight.’

The attack was set for 9:40 p.m. and began right on time with the simultaneous thunder of more than 900 guns in a literally earth-shattering artillery barrage that could be heard up to 60 miles away. This was the first spark of Montgomery’s shotgun-style blast that blew Rommel’s army to pieces and knocked what was left of it backwards into Libya. The ‘Devil’s Gardens’ started to explode as shells hit all over the place. Some German and Italian soldiers fell dead from fatal concussions due to the force of the artillery shells falling around them. ‘With most exceptional precision, the British shelled our known positions, in which tremendous casualties occurred’, Rommel later wrote.

In the light of the full moon and the eerie glow of flares, British troops advanced to the hum of Scottish bagpipes. To avenge their 1940 capture by Rommel at St. Valery, Monty had given the men of the reformed 51st Highland Division a leading role in the battle. Taking part in the attack were troops from across the world, and Montgomery led them well in a testament to his skill at international leadership and communication. Assaulting in the north were the 9th Australian, 51st Highland, 2nd New Zealand and 1st South African Divisions, while in the south, the 4th Indian Division as well as Free French and Greek troops joined forces with the famed ‘Desert Rats’ of the 7th Armoured Division and troops of the 44th British Home Counties Division.

No detail was left unchecked in Monty’s plan. He had choreographed everything perfectly. Sappers equipped with long-handled metal detectors cleared wide paths in the minefield for British tanks to advance. Monty ensured routes were prearranged and that paths through the minefield were marked with no less than 88,000 lamps and 120 miles of white marker tape, while water carts sprinkled the paths to stop dust from flying up and obscuring vision. When a path was cleared, orange and green lights signalled it was safe for tanks and men to pass through. Monty made sure his men were well-provided for when they marched into battle. Aside from

plenty of rations and extra digging tools for making foxholes, men were given empty sacks they could use to build sandbags to protect themselves from enemy bullets. Monty also had mobile blood banks in refrigerated trucks driven up and parked near the battlefield for wounded men to receive immediate blood transfusions.

The battle plan was clever and, although the British troops had tough going through the minefield and things got harrowing due to fierce German resistance, it worked. Montgomery exploited Rommel's weaknesses. He knew Rommel only had a relatively small reserve force of tanks he could use to counter-attack and plug a breakthrough in his defensive lines. So Monty aimed to fool Rommel into using this silver bullet on the wrong area. Monty knew Rommel was capable of improvising once he realized what was happening. To keep him guessing, Monty also threw an extra punch into the battle in the form of X Corps, which he had kept hidden in the Nile Delta until the last minute to prevent the Germans from sensing its approach.

What Montgomery did not know initially was that Rommel was not actually there. The Desert Fox missed the launch of the decisive battle that he had been awaiting in North Africa – the one he was convinced would have widespread repercussions and affect the entire course of the Second World War. The event started without him and he was doomed to respond to the crisis late. This would happen to Rommel again when armies under Montgomery's leadership invaded Normandy, France on D-Day in 1944. To make matters worse, Rommel had not even been able to start the battle himself, as he had hoped. Montgomery had literally stolen his thunder and was running rampant across the desert in a total reversal of what had been going on for over the past year.

Monty's element of surprise was so complete that Rommel's stand-in, Georg Stumme, literally dropped dead of a heart attack right after the attack started. Stumme by all accounts was not a particularly talented general. He arrived in Africa without a clue about what to do other than agree with Rommel's views about everything – which was sufficient in causing no ill feelings but showed lack of initiative. In the quiet period before the attack, Stumme went to the front robotically every day and in the evening to check

on it, like some kind of patrol, before returning to his headquarters. In accord with Rommel's directive, he made sure the troops continued to lay mines and plant booby traps. This was the extent of his resourcefulness. When the attack opened, the Germans started panicking and Stumme was no exception. As British guns rained hell upon them with tongues of white flame streaking across the sky, Stumme emphatically told his acting chief of staff, General Siegfried Westphal, that it was time for Rommel to come back. When confronted with German officers who wished to fire artillery back at the British, Stumme feared what would happen if he used up Rommel's remaining ammunition and refused to allow it.

Of course this was a tactical mistake and caused consternation among the German commanders, including Rommel, whose return came about because Stumme met with an untimely end. Feeling that he could not tell well enough what was going on during the increasingly hellish battle, Stumme decided to go and see for himself up close on 24 October. Westphal urged caution and an escort but Stumme thought he would be safe and went out for a peek. He drove up close to the battlefield in a staff car, where he promptly – and predictably – ran into British infantry who fired upon him. What exactly happened afterwards remains unclear. It appears that Stumme's death was a result of his failure to give decisive orders even in the last moments of his life. No command came from Stumme at this critical moment, neither to fight, nor surrender nor flee. It was every man for himself. One officer in the car was fatally shot. Stumme tried to get out of the car, probably to take cover, while at the same moment his driver spontaneously decided to speed away. The general seemingly tried to hang onto the car but fell off. In a testament to the loyalty that Stumme failed to inspire, the driver had no idea what had happened to the general nor had he apparently cared to go back to find out. Stumme's corpse was later found in a different area with no visible wounds. He had died of a heart attack.

Monty continued to maul Rommel's forces. By 1:00 a.m. on 24 October 1942 the British had overrun the enemy outposts and were within metres of breaching their main defence line.

Rommel Returns

Meanwhile, Rommel was nervously stranded in the Austrian mountains, happy to see his family but otherwise on edge, when on the afternoon of 24 October a telephone call came through from Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel informing him that the British had begun heavily bombarding his position in Africa, his stand-in Stumme had gone missing, and otherwise nobody knew what exactly was going on. Rommel declared he was well enough to return, but this plan wasn't confirmed until he unexpectedly got a phone call from Hitler himself several hours later. Stumme had not been found and had been written off as a loss. Hitler was unconvinced the attack was anything very serious and unsure whether he was willing to allow Rommel to leave Europe. Rommel finally got orders to leave around midnight and was back in the sands of the Sahara by 26 October.

After arriving, Rommel was appalled by the vehemence of the attack and the carnage he found. He ordered his troops to stand fast and maintain their positions despite casualties. Like Monty, he was strong-willed and indisposed to give in. Rommel rallied his troops and, reversing Stumme's previous orders to conserve ammunition, had his troops pour sustained fire into the British ranks with 88mm Flak guns. The fire blew up pieces of the minefield in British faces and immersed them in clouds of apocalyptic explosions. The combined effect of the guns, mines and booby traps ripped men and vehicles to pieces.

Rommel had once expressed of his actions in the First World War that his mountain rangers would never surrender conquered ground. This was a point of pride for him, and as a young man he had often fought bitterly and stubbornly to avoid relinquishing his territorial gains. He displayed this mindset at El Alamein, refusing to budge, thrashing ferociously and forcing the British to claw every inch of soil out of his troops' dead hands. He described the battle as a 'wrestling match for every metre'.

Montgomery continued to surprise him. As the battle continued raging over the course of the next several days, Rommel improvised to try and counteract Monty's moves using his motorized reserves. Monty recognized Rommel's counterblows quickly and evaded them like a boxer, changing the direction of his own attacks to bypass Rommel's moves and hit him in different weak spots. He did this several times during the battle. In doing so,

Monty managed to beat Rommel in a game of mobile warfare. By 1 November, he managed to bamboozle Rommel into shifting his tanks in the wrong direction. ‘Rommel was playing into my hands, for the bulk of his German forces was now concentrated on the coast, leaving the Italians to hold the more southerly sectors’, wrote Monty, who had noticed an apparent lack of German confidence in Italian troops due to the disposition of Rommel’s units on the battlefield and sensed a weakness to exploit. ‘I could drive a blow between the Germans and Italians and concentrate on destroying the former’, he added. And he did.

On one occasion, Rommel assumed during a lull that Monty was regrouping and called a staff meeting, only to be unpleasantly surprised to hear that Monty’s forces had materialized in a weakened area and were hammering at it. To conceal his changing moves on the battlefield from the Germans, Monty deployed artificial fog, a technique he would use again later in Western Europe.

‘Behind a wall of fire and artificial fog, the attacking infantry pushed forward to clear mines and remove obstacles. The direction of the thrusts were changed to [target] unfavourable positions often under the use of artificial fog’, Rommel wrote later. ‘When the infantry cleared paths through the mines, the heavy tanks and infantry in tightly closed formation pushed forward.’

Rommel was surprised by the cohesion of the new Eighth Army – it was different from what he was used to. He noted that Montgomery’s army manoeuvred at night ‘with extraordinary cleverness and skill’. While still unwilling to acknowledge Monty’s ingenuity, he added: ‘Only the most intensive training of the British troops must have preceded this offensive.’

The Germans fought back ferociously. The Italians, whose morale had suffered in the past and once needed a lot of remedial training from Rommel to be battle-ready, put up stiffer resistance than expected. Rommel’s men were well-trained and not ready to go down without throwing everything they had at the British. As time wore on, the element of surprise faded for the Axis forces, who were experienced desert warriors thanks to Rommel and had no trouble reacting spontaneously to face down a threat. Rommel’s hardy ‘Africans’ got organized and began to rally

themselves, improvising and hitting back hard. Consequently, Monty's advancing troops got bogged down inside the minefield and began taking some gruesome casualties. The battle became very bloody as the booby traps did their deadly work. In one gruesome incident, a platoon of thirty British soldiers were wiped out completely by a 250lb aerial bomb that the Germans had buried and rigged as an improvised explosive, which literally tore them all to shreds.

But the British were giving as good as they got. German troops concealed in dugouts and entrenched gun nests were buried alive by British tanks that drove right over them. The ground was littered with dead and dismembered Germans and Italians who had either been blown to pieces by artillery, died of concussive injuries or had been shot up or burned alive in their tanks. The battle became ugly as Rommel's army hung on tooth and nail, striking vicious blows at the British even against the onslaught. Rommel's venomous minefield wasn't finished wreaking destruction either.

Although the hearts of his officers began to waver in moments of crisis, Montgomery reacted with the firm poise of a good commander and remained calm. He refused to listen to panicking subordinates urging him to yield. Monty knew the fight would be hard and they had to maintain the initiative lest Rommel gain the upper hand as had happened so many times before. Monty made several key adjustments to his plan but the essentials remained the same: the Eighth Army would push onward and throw the Germans back.

Show Them the Way of Death

This battle brought many shattering moments for Rommel. Foremost among them was a direct order from Hitler to lead the troops to 'victory or death' – which meant death, in other words. This came right after Montgomery had managed to dupe Rommel into sending his German tanks in the wrong direction and was in the act of viciously clawing huge holes through his Panzer army.

'The 3 November will remain one the most memorable days in history. Because on this day, it was laid bare that the fortunes of war had not only

abandoned our [Germany's] flag with absolute finality, but from this time onwards, the freedom of the *Panzerarmee* to make decisions was suppressed by the heaviest restrictions due to the permanent interference of highest authorities in combat leadership', wrote Rommel in a rather dramatic passage describing the events. He believed that Germany lost the war at this point and also stated that Hitler oppressed him and his army.

Up to this point, Rommel had made repeated attempts to get the High Command's attention so as to secure some assistance to his army. As the stuffy old Prussians tended to dismiss him, he usually approached the one person who had showed willingness to listen to him and had the authority to get things done: Hitler. These requests were not Rommel asking for special favours but rather for supplies and resolutions to well-founded concerns about situations facing his army as it became more neglected by higher authorities in Germany and Italy.

It has been claimed that Rommel had simply 'gone rogue' and trampled across Africa without anybody in Germany wanting him to, and should have realized that he was only running a sideshow. This is untrue. It is correct that Rommel initially expanded his objectives in North Africa on his own initiative – but he was given to understand by Hitler that his efforts were entirely approved of. He had been promoted to Field Marshal, had troop strength and higher designations added to his army, and it was made clear to him that he had the full support of political leaders in Germany and Italy. He was given numerous signs and words of full support for his objective to take Egypt.

These outward signs had been enough to convince Rommel that he could rely on Axis leaders, particularly Hitler, in a crisis. He soon found out that was not true. While authorities claimed they would fully invest in his campaign, promises were broken. Nobody wanted to hear his requests for supplies or provide answers to his questions for clarification about objectives from political leadership. The questions Rommel brought up were perfectly normal for a general in the field to expect answers to. While the Italians generally did their best to meet Rommel's material needs, he was dismissed by Hitler and German military officials as they became increasingly caught up in making war on the Eastern Front.

Yet Rommel was fiercely devoted to his troops above all else and would not cease trying to represent their interests – which brought him into open conflict with Hitler, and sowed the first seeds of hatred against Hitler in Rommel's heart. He was already discontented and disillusioned about Hitler's lack of care about the fighting troops in North Africa by the time the Second Battle of El Alamein came. The festering resentment would burst when, in response to his pleas for help and some sense of strategic direction from his leadership, he received a startling order during the crisis of the battle.

This direct order from Hitler repeated the usual empty refrains Rommel had heard about supplies and air support, but at its conclusion, demanded in no uncertain terms that Rommel and his men die in their places. A previous English translation of this letter which has been widely circulated fails to convey its potent nuances and the full weight of its significance. Due to this previous poor translation, it has often been mistaken for an empty propaganda message. That is not the case. The original German is powerful and precise. A new translation of Hitler's full order by the author of this book reads as follows:

To GFM [*Generalfeldmarschall*] Rommel

Along with me, the German people are following the heroic defensive battle in Egypt with reverent believing trust in your personage as a leader [lit. '*Führerpersönlichkeit*'] and the courage of the German-Italian troops under you. In the situation in which you [Rommel] find yourself, there can be no other thought except to hold out, not take any step back, and to throw every weapon and every fighter, who can be made available for action, into the battle. Considerable reinforcements of aerial units will be from now and in coming days transferred to command of the *Oberbefehlshaber* South [Kesselring]. Also the Duce and the Comando Supremo will undertake unparalleled efforts to get the supplies to you for the continuation of the battle. Despite his superiority, the enemy will also be at the end of his strength. It would not be the first time in history that the stronger will

triumphed over the stronger battalions. To your troops, however, you [Rommel] can show no other path than that to victory or to death.

Adolf Hitler

There are several interesting points to be made about Hitler's message. He starts off the letter with flattery of Rommel, intended as signs of magnanimity – something akin to expressions of 'royal favour', so to speak. Rommel is assured he has Hitler's full attention as well as that of 'the German people' as a whole – high praise indeed. The word for 'believing' that Hitler used to describe their trust in him is one usually used to express religious belief. So he was invoking something spiritual here – perhaps he was hinting that Rommel had a destiny. Following this, he credited Rommel with having his own 'Führer personage' ('*Führerpersönlichkeit*'). There was only one Führer in Germany and that was Hitler. Within the context of Nazi propaganda, to claim that another person had a *Führerpersönlichkeit* was to paint them as a direct parallel to Hitler. For example, SS leader Heinrich Himmler once described an ancient German king, Heinrich the Fowler, as a *Führerpersönlichkeit* – somebody whose essence reflected that of Hitler. From a Nazi perspective, this was the ultimate compliment one could get. There are plenty of other German words that Hitler could have used to express military leadership without such an overtone. That the egotistical Hitler himself would be appealing to Rommel as a type of fellow Führer is remarkable, especially as Rommel was not a member of his inner circle.

But this flowery language should not be interpreted as signs of sincere friendship from Hitler towards Rommel. Hitler heaped similar flattery and even promotions upon German officers fighting under the command of Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus at Stalingrad. Because there was, of course, an ulterior motive behind all of it. After Hitler dispensed with flattery in this note, the ugly point of the whole thing reared its head. He specifically orders Rommel not to take 'any step back'. He went so far as to tell Rommel to have 'no other thought' than to follow this order – the gist, in plain English, being, 'Don't you even dare to think about leaving'. He specified that any person capable of bearing arms – not just soldiers – and

any conceivable weapon should be ‘thrown’ into the battle. After vaguely assuring Rommel aid would come to him somehow, and making a guess that the enemy will have to give up eventually, he comes abruptly to the essence of his directive: if they could not win, then Rommel and his troops must die. He delivered this order to Rommel in a very emphatic tone, telling him that he is not permitted to show the men ‘any other path’. This is not a passive type of ‘you can’t’. It’s an order: you are not allowed to show your men any other option. He ended his note with the words ‘to death’. Suddenly it became clear why Hitler was willing to give Rommel so many compliments – to get him to accept his fate and obey. This was a good luck and goodbye letter. Hitler did not expect Rommel to last. In fact, he did not want him to.

So far from being a mere propaganda message to motivate Rommel and the army, this was a very direct and clear order demanding Rommel and his troops commit battlefield suicide. Hitler’s approach was indeed very similar to the one he took towards Paulus at Stalingrad. Short of winning the battle, Hitler’s pride demanded a pointless annihilation of his soldiers that could be cast in a heroic light. But Rommel’s reaction would be very different from that of Paulus, and indeed from a majority of German commanders during the Second World War.

A Choice of Allegiance

When describing the letter and its contents, Rommel repeatedly wrote about his own feelings of shock and confusion. This is the only point in his memoir where the methodical Rommel described himself as having a sheer inability to grasp something mentally or to come up with a solution. In keeping with his customary writing style, in which the sociable Rommel preferred to focus not only on himself but on other soldiers around him, he included the reactions of other officers along with his own. ‘It was as if we had all been hit over the head’, he wrote, ‘and I, for the very first time during the African campaign, did not know what I should do.’

Rommel expressed his incredulity about the language Hitler used in the letter. He particularly took issue with Hitler’s remark about pseudo-

religious ‘belief’. ‘In this order, the most impossible feat was demanded. The most “believing” soldier can be struck dead by an aerial bomb’, he wrote, sarcastically repeating the word Hitler had used. ‘Apparently despite our very clear situation reports, it had still not become clear in the Führer’s headquarters how things were in Africa’, he continued, taking a bitterly mocking tone. ‘What could have helped us were weapons, fuel and aircraft, but not orders.’

Unfortunately despite his horror about the orders, Rommel decided – at first – to obey them. For 24 hours afterwards, German and Italian troops would die in a senseless bloodbath for which he later expressed regret. It was not easy for Rommel to pass the orders down. ‘I had wrenched myself inside to make this decision, because I myself had always demanded unconditional obedience and therefore also wanted to subordinate myself to this principle’, he wrote.

Rommel and other members of his staff – like so many Germans during that dark time in their country’s history – swallowed their feelings, used their sense of discipline to smother their consciences and resigned themselves to go down with the ship. ‘A profound apathy overpowered all of us as we commanded that all occupied positions were to be held in accord with the highest orders’, wrote Rommel. Not a single step back. His subordinate, General Ritter von Thoma, is said to have decried the order as madness and refused to go along with it. However, Von Thoma’s opposition was not enough to change anything as long as everyone else around him was willing to fall on their swords.

Apathy was impossible for Rommel. In despair and fury he began voicing his anger against Hitler. It did not go unnoticed. Taking offence, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring confronted Rommel about his willingness to speak out against the Führer. Kesselring was loyal to Hitler and believed his orders needed to be respected. A heated argument erupted, and what Rommel described as ‘some bitter words’ were exchanged. This confrontation forced Rommel to speak his mind and vent his anger against Germany’s most powerful man – a dangerous act. But Rommel no longer cared. ‘Until this point, I had assumed that the Führer left the command of the army to me. This senseless order has had the effect of a bombshell upon

us', he snapped. Kesselring argued that Hitler had learned from experience on the Eastern Front that in such circumstances a front line could and should be held at all costs. Rommel was not having it. 'He [Hitler] cannot just easily apply any knowledge he has formed from experiences in Russia to leading the war in Africa', he protested, taking a decidedly flippant tone and word choices in German about Hitler's behaviour. 'In this case he really should have left the decision to me.'

Meanwhile the troops went like sheep to the slaughter. A sense of torment came over Rommel and his officers as they allowed it to happen. 'They [the troops] were ready, in accord with the directive of the Führer, to sacrifice themselves to the last man', he wrote, adding, 'Within us, an immeasurable bitterness rose up when we thought of the outstanding spirit of the army …' A wholesale wave of battlefield suicides began.

Loath to disobey orders, Rommel at first sought permission from Hitler to withdraw. On 3 November, he reported to Hitler's headquarters via wireless: 'We continue our most extreme efforts to control the battlefield. The losses are however so high that to hold a cohesive front is no longer possible.' Acknowledging he was aware of Hitler's orders not to give any ground, Rommel protested: 'But I believe that the tactic used by the English to punch one small group after another amid the sharpest concentration of fire and continuous air attacks is turning against us and is steadily depleting our forces.' He suggested a fighting retreat, adding: 'I am asking for permission to do this.' No permission was forthcoming.

Despite his initial decision to obey Hitler, Rommel still had a conscience. Human emotion ended up breaking his will to go along with Hitler's directive. Rommel had been morally conflicted from the outset of transmitting the orders. For a whole day he let the army be annihilated in its place and prepared himself for the same fate. What seemed to push him over the edge was the loss of his entire Italian XX Corps, which included his beloved Ariete Division, on 4 November. This Italian unit had fought alongside Rommel since he had first arrived in Africa and was deeply loyal to him. Rommel had become very fond of the men within that division. The Ariete unfortunately had outdated equipment, a problem for most Italian troops. It didn't stop them from giving their best – up to their last moments.

Rommel wrote that the Italians ‘fought with complete and most outstanding bravery’ as, using the only flimsy and outdated tanks they had available, they faced down heavily armoured British tanks – including formidable American-made Shermans – and artillery. Rommel wrote that ‘tank after tank burst or burned up’ until the last radio transmission came in from the Ariete that they were surrounded by enemy tanks. Their last words were: ‘The tanks of the Ariete are fighting.’ The division was annihilated. Rommel was deeply affected by the loss.

Shortly after hearing the last words of his devoted and doomed Italian friends over the radio, Rommel snapped out of his stupor. He’d had enough of these cruel orders – and, ultimately, of Hitler himself. Feelings of hatred for Hitler and high-powered Nazi officials would become evident within Rommel in subsequent weeks, months and years that followed, culminating in his involvement to remove Hitler from power and his eventual death at Hitler’s hands in 1944. The spark that lit the fire of resistance within Rommel came to life as he watched his men die at El Alamein. His rebellious thoughts and feelings would intensify further still at El Agheila. Rommel’s loyalty had always been to his troops – he saw his men as his comrades and himself as one of the infantry. He had been faced with the decision about whether to obey his political chief or act in the best interest of his men. The troops prevailed.

Just after the loss of the Ariete, Rommel called his subordinates together post-haste to try to organize a retreat. Disobeying Hitler’s emphatic orders not to budge from the spot, Rommel ordered a full retreat. His Panzer Army had been soundly smashed. All that was left for him was to ‘rescue what could be rescued’, he wrote.

But a retreat would not be easy. Monty had won, but he still wasn’t finished with his famous opponent. Monty would doggedly pursue his enemy every step of the way. After the battle, Monty was promoted to the rank of full general for ‘distinguished services in the field’ and was also made a Knight Commander of the Bath (KCB).

Two Very Skilled Opponents

Much has been said about the battle in later years, mostly to cast Montgomery in a negative light. He is criticized because the battle was fiercer and took longer than expected, or because it was bloody, or he had access to intelligence reports about Rommel's supply situation – things all quite common in warfare. No battle ever goes exactly as expected, and if commanders made no use of intelligence reports and fought their battles blindfolded to demonstrate their skills, then they would be gamblers rather than military leaders.

It has also been rumoured that Monty's plan was not original but the creation of Sir Harold Alexander, then serving as Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East. These rumours have existed since the war and are untrue. Alexander was not an overbearing personality. He was brought in to keep a bird's eye view on the Middle East and otherwise left Montgomery to fight his own battles. Furthermore Monty himself had a dominating temperament; strongly independent, he could never thrive in an environment where he had no freedom and would have refused to be spoon-fed instructions or have plans dictated to him by anyone. This is something Brooke recognized when he wrote that if Monty were 'put on too tight a rein' he would be 'put off his stride'. This is what influenced Brooke's decision not to place Monty under Auchinleck's command to lead the Eighth Army. Alexander on the other hand was someone who Brooke could trust not to bear down on Montgomery or micromanage him. Monty's own writings about Alexander prove Brooke's assessment was correct. 'He never bothered me, never fussed me, never suggested what I ought to do, and gave me at once everything I asked for – having listened patiently to my explanations of why I wanted it', Monty wrote of Alexander, adding that 'he was too big to require explanations; he gave me his trust'.

The myth speculating about Monty's plan originates from the same wellspring of critics who have followed the same discordant refrain. They have been unable to decide whether they think it was Auchinleck, Alexander or De Guingand who planned the Battle of El Alamein, but there is one thing they can agree on, which is to not give any credit to Montgomery for his own decisive victory. These same critics variously accuse Montgomery of being unmanageable at the same time they insist he

was meek, and assert he devised plans with strategic shortcomings when at the same time they claim these very plans were someone else's idea entirely; the illogicality of these various assertions shows them to be false. These claims are hollow echoes of a chorus of voices that did nothing but try to tear down Montgomery's reputation in the post-war era and years after his death. The truth is that Montgomery was a brilliant military commander entirely responsible for planning and winning his own battles, including at El Alamein.

What truly shaped the Battle of Alamein, more than most historians have admitted, are the unique skills that both Rommel and Montgomery possessed as commanders. The fact that the battle became so bloody and drawn out – that it was not a walkover for Monty – was due to Rommel's resolve, his ingenuity, the hardiness of his troops and his gritty determination to stem the tide of the British advance through every means at his disposal. He demonstrated the same grim tenacity that would later see Allied troops, despite material and numerical superiority, be forced to fight battered German troops for every inch of bombed cities in Europe.

The reason why the Eighth Army won the battle was Montgomery's leadership and talents as a field commander – not, as some including Rommel would claim, merely coincidences, such as the facts that he possessed numerical superiority, intelligence and greater access to supplies. It need not be pointed out that British commanders prior to Monty possessed access to cryptological intelligence resources as well as greater supplies and failed to defeat Rommel. Furthermore, Rommel previously defeated enemies with greater troop strength during both World Wars – using deception, speedy manoeuvres, unpredictability and willingness to deviate from higher orders in the face of opportunity. He also liked to intimidate his opponents; in this case, his 'Devil's Gardens' were supposed to do the trick. Montgomery refused to be hustled, bluffed or intimidated. He forced Rommel to react to him rather than the other way around.

Furthermore, the Second Battle of El Alamein was not a straightforward set-piece chess match of a battle. Rommel didn't play by those rules – as always, he was spontaneous and compelled Monty to think on his feet. On his own initiative, Monty quickly adjusted his plans throughout the course

of the battle to overcome the stalemate that Rommel was trying to force on him. He surprised Rommel by changing the direction of his attacks under the cover of artificial fog and hitting him in weak points – which Rommel himself admitted occurred. Montgomery has been criticized for ordering his men to persist in attacking. Yet to give in would have been to lose. Montgomery was far from careless of the lives of his men. The criticisms Montgomery has faced for excelling and winning this battle are undeserved.

Despite the hell he gave the British during the fight, Rommel would later refer to the Second Battle of El Alamein as a 'battle without hope'. He penned his assessments not long after the campaign during a time when he was embittered by events and made attempts to justify his decisions as well as his losses. Evidence suggests he did have some hope – at first. His skills at improvisation, the quality of his troops and their fierce determination to repel the British onslaught made the battle quite bloody – and a lesser commander than Monty would have given up or pulled back. Rommel's previous opponents would have backed down. Therefore Rommel did have a fair chance of holding his position. Eventually the battle became a massacre for him, at which point he was correct to defy Hitler's orders and attempt to save human life by removing his troops from danger. Perhaps things would have been better for Rommel in the long run had he simply been willing to capitulate. However Rommel's pride likely would not allow him to surrender as long as he could retreat and avoid yielding.

Ultimately the struggle at El Alamein was in essence a true contest of wills, and it was Monty's that ultimately prevailed.

CHAPTER 6

PURSUIT INTO LIBYA

‘Life is a terrible practical joke,
One man lacks these, while another lacks those,
One wants too much, another too few,
And strength and luck come into play too.’

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Das Leben ist ein schlechter Spaß

In the early days of November 1942, German and Italian troops who had once lorded over the Sahara’s stunning isolation and dared to dream of conquering Cairo were fleeing in shattered droves backwards across the wilderness. Rommel’s army was broken. Its situation now mirrored what the British Eighth Army had experienced over the past year. The men had no clear objective other than to flee from a powerful and shrewd enemy. Rommel had been utterly defeated for the first time in the war. ‘We had lost the decisive battle in the African campaign’, he admitted. He wanted to believe victory had only been a difference of supplies and troop strength,

but the barefaced reality was Montgomery had overpowered him with extreme cunning and unbending willpower.

Montgomery's army was bruised but not torn up. Under Monty's leadership the British had, for the first time, managed to throw the seemingly invincible Rommel for a loop. Despite being exhausted from heavy fighting, the troops of the Eighth Army experienced a sense of relief and exhilaration at seeing Rommel's once dreaded army crumbling before their eyes and scattering westward into the wilds.

For Rommel, the battle spelled not only the end of German fortunes in Africa but the beginning of an inevitable downward spiral he foresaw for Germany. This was not just Rommel's depression speaking. The mathematical Field Marshal had applied his keen sense of calculation to wider events in the war's global landscape, including Germany's ongoing offensive on the Eastern Front, and he viewed the failure to capture the Suez Canal and gain access to Middle Eastern oil as critical strategic fiascos. In his memoirs, Rommel wrote of his belief that his defeat at El Alamein represented the turning point of the whole war – a war at this time he regarded as lost. He hinted as much in letters to his wife – and would tell her so in person during a period of leave he would have in November 1942.

Operation Torch

Apart from the disaster he had found at El Alamein, another significant event had dimmed Rommel's view of Germany's ability to win. While he and Monty had been locking horns and goring each other at El Alamein, a new and powerful force had arrived on the scene: the Americans had decided to put boots on the ground in the war and had landed in French North Africa on 8 November 1942 in Operation Torch.

The landings, which took place in Algeria and Morocco, were messy. Troops and supplies washed ashore in different places and in the wrong locations. Communications failed. Tanks rolled up sporadically across the beach in odd spots. The French resisted the landings and fired on the American troops. Despite the presence of the much-lauded and more than slightly overrated Major General George S. Patton, the soldiers of the US

Army initially lacked confidence and began ducking for cover everywhere in the wake of the Moroccan landings. In response, Patton was seen physically kicking and dragging his men out from their hiding places, screaming curses as he clambered through the rolling surf to wrestle with his soldiers – hardly an inspiring spectacle. Eventually the fracas subsided, during which the Americans narrowly decided not to blast Casablanca to smithereens. The Yanks had made a typically rollicking entry into the arena of war which, if it wasn't the most orderly, at least made something of a Wild West impression that Axis leadership sat up and took notice of.

The presence of American forces in the region would become an intense source of worry for both Hitler and Mussolini, although the German side was the first to become worried. Ciano noted that the Italian reaction was at first more blasé. 'At five-thirty in the morning von Ribbentrop telephoned to inform me of American landings in Algerian and Moroccan ports. He was rather nervous and wanted to know what we intended to do. I must confess that, having been caught unawares, I was too sleepy to give a very satisfactory answer', wrote Ciano coolly. When Mussolini heard the news, he reacted with typical bombast and declared in response the Italians would simply invade Corsica and go on to occupy the part of France that wasn't already occupied by the Germans.

The Germans were not so optimistic. For Rommel, the writing on the wall was clear, and he asserted that Operation Torch 'spelt the end of the army in Africa'. Ciano noted a German source told him 'that at the [German] Embassy they are literally terrified by the blow, which is very severe and above all absolutely unexpected'. The perennially cantankerous Ciano expressed irritation at what he viewed as unnecessary fussing by various German officials in response to the American landings, particularly from Minister of Foreign Affairs and *Obergruppenführer*-SS Joachim von Ribbentrop. Upon being summoned to a 14 November conference convened by General Eberhard von Mackensen at Ribbentrop's instigation to discuss Operation Torch and messages to be delivered to French troops in Tunisia, Ciano became exasperated and said he would rather have gone to bed. 'With this kind of stuff he [von Mackensen] might have allowed me to sleep in peace', he complained in his diary. 'In fact, I advised von Mackensen "to

find some good sleeping pills for von Ribbentrop, who has insomnia and pesters too many people".' Von Mackensen, who would later receive a death sentence for war crimes, was a baleful Prussian with permanently furrowed eyebrows. His reaction to Ciano's advice was not recorded but can be well imagined as an example of one reason why the German-Italian alliance was doomed to fail.

Although things calmed down after the initial tumult of their arrival, the Americans experienced lasting strains of disorganization in French North Africa. It took some time before US forces were ready to join the fight. Unfortunately they were at first walloped by the Germans when they eventually did. The Americans at this stage were greenhorns not only in terms of desert warfare but with regard to combat experience in general – as the British had unfailingly noticed and as Rommel himself would mark with some amount of disdain. Several leading American generals – Patton not least among them – came strutting into the conflict with chips on their shoulders and, in their eagerness to whet their own ambitions and garner public attention, would arguably display more zeal for elbowing Churchill and Brooke into difficult corners and fighting against Montgomery than cooperating as Allies.

However the average American fighting men were tough and resilient. They possessed pride and a keen awareness of their individual dignity no matter their background in life, and thus never allowed failures or setbacks to have the last word. This irrepressible spirit was famously captured in the phrase 'Don't Tread on Me' emblazoned on Christopher Gadsden's 1775 yellow flag used to rally American colonists to rebel against King George III of Britain, and heralded a lasting legacy that was not to be underestimated. Whenever battered by their Axis opponents, American troops would inevitably rebound and assault the enemy with determination – motivated not by orders alone, but by their own personal initiative as individuals. Entering the war, the Americans brought with them an enviable wealth of resources, a genius for devising inventions that made life – and fighting – easier, and soldiers who, if a bit hot-headed compared to their British cousins, possessed ruggedness and élan that made them both hardy and valiant in the crucible of battle.

For now the Americans were not Rommel's immediate concern. Morocco was a long way off from where he and his troops now found themselves – fleeing across westward Egypt and back over the border into Libya, not unlike the disgraced Marshal Graziani had two years previously. The desert was indeed a fickle ally. The patch of desert that Rommel had assumed would be fairly easy to sail across into the Nile Delta had instead turned into a hellish cauldron. Rommel's problem was Montgomery, who had just beaten him soundly at El Alamein and was now furiously chasing him.

The Flight From Egypt

Rommel had started to evacuate his troops in as organized a manner as he could. He made the decision in haste on 4 November and got his troops going in a more concentrated effort as of 5 November. He initially relocated his headquarters temporarily to Sidi Barrani, a desolate village on the Egyptian side of the Egypt-Libya border – an indication of his unwillingness to abandon Egypt for as long as he could hang onto it. However, faced with the steamroller of Montgomery's advance, Rommel opted to give up ground rather than take the risk of fighting again. He evacuated with lightning speed and, with Swabian ingenuity, had vehicles towed to conserve both the machines and fuel for future endeavours. He had his troops fire fiercely at the British to disguise his movements and harry any efforts at pursuit. Thanks to Rommel's gift for subterfuge – and also his decision to make his retreat as defiantly combative and as hard-hitting as possible – Monty failed to recognize at first that the Desert Fox was fleeing. This was understandable as the situation was still rapidly developing and Rommel's shrewd and speedy withdrawal manoeuvres were not at first entirely clear.

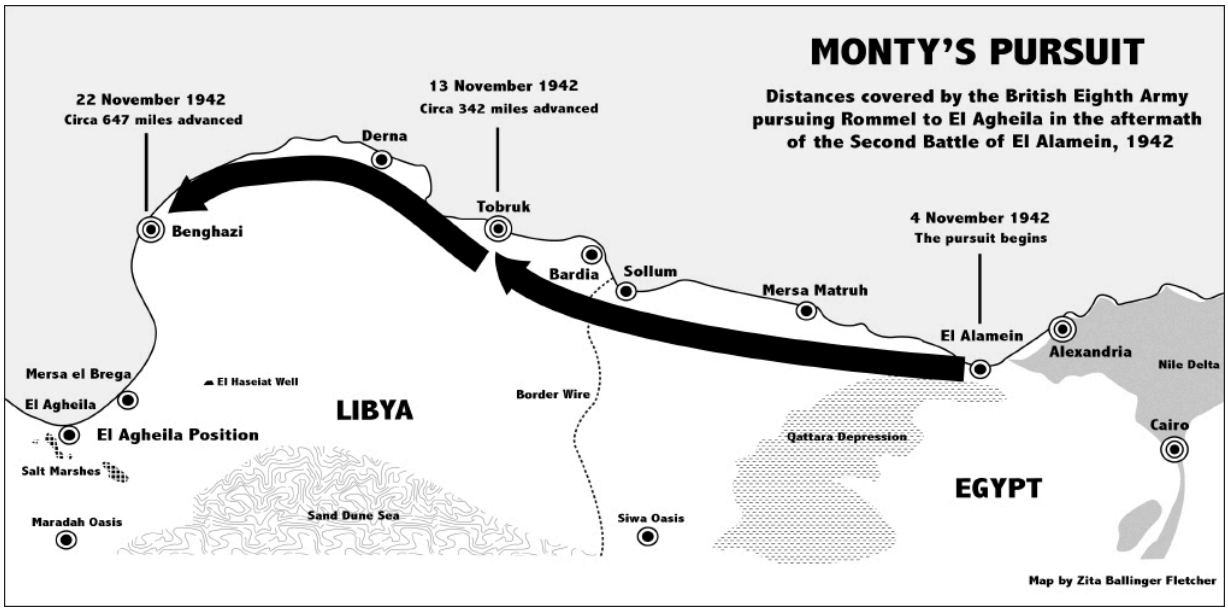
Once he realized his opponent was running away, Monty pursued Rommel with fiendish determination. The New Zealand Division dispatched Rommel's rearguards left at his previous HQ site at Sidi Barrani, taking it by 9 November. Other rear elements of Rommel's troops were overtaken within the next few days. Monty captured the once fearsome

Halfaya Pass, previously a bastion of Rommel's known to British troops as 'Hellfire Pass', with a night surprise attack. The Eighth Army quickly overran Capuzzo, Sollum and the border town of Bardia.

By 11 November Rommel had pulled back into Libya, his old hunting ground, where he hoped to recover his strength. While some of his troops fled using the coastal road, the majority of Rommel's manpower fled across a broad front through the desert.

This dispersal of Rommel's men, largely on foot, made it difficult for Monty's troops to contain their retreat or for the RAF to hit them. British airstrikes on the moving columns were sporadic and messy. The RAF lacked dive-bomber capability which resulted in many bombs missing their marks. Moreover, many of Rommel's troops fled on foot and vanished into the dunes.

Rommel expected the men to follow and catch up with the rest of the army. He pulled tanks and vehicles back rapidly to save the machines for their fighting value – without allowing some of his men a chance to get aboard or bothering to organize their retreat. He wrote that he believed the men would follow and reorganize themselves after their initial panic subsided. Many did, although some forced to flee without wheels had an understandably hard time of it. Navigating the desert by vehicle is hard enough, but left to run over the dunes on the strength of one's legs alone with a flurry of enemy tanks in pursuit and swooping planes bearing down was most assuredly not a pleasant affair. Many, particularly large swathes of Italian infantry who lacked access to vehicles, were captured. Monty took an estimated total of 30,000 prisoners, including nine generals.



Map 1 Monty's Pursuit. Distances covered by the British Eighth Army pursuing Rommel to El Agheila in the aftermath of the Second Battle of El Alamein.

Some of the troops were angry with Rommel as they believed he had left them in the lurch – among them the men of the Ramcke Parachute Brigade, a Luftwaffe outfit that Rommel admitted that he personally disliked for its arrogance. Left behind at El Alamein, the paratroopers fought their way across the desert on foot. After a series of wild escapades, they eventually astonished Rommel by emerging from the wilderness in bedraggled but defiant condition like some lost tribe of immortal wanderers. These men were indignant at having been left behind with no vehicles. Although impressed by their survival skills, Rommel was otherwise unrepentant about having abandoned them, citing – with typical mathematical logic – his pressing need to evacuate vehicles and conserve fuel. The brigade's leader, a diehard Nazi named Hermann-Bernhard Ramcke, wasted little time in removing himself from Rommel's command and returning to Germany in a huff, never to reappear in Africa after his distinctly short-lived 1942 tour of duty; following his desert crisis, Ramcke would continue to distinguish himself not only as a Nazi but as an extraordinary escape artist. Rommel's behaviour was characteristic. Taking immediate action and expecting others to 'catch up' with him was normal for him in victory as well as defeat.

The scattered troops fleeing on foot across various desert passes were hard for the RAF to spot and avoided being destroyed from the air, saving Rommel a significant portion of his manpower. Rommel himself remarked in his writings that the desert allowed his troops to have an easier time evading enemy bombs due to the freedom it gave them to disperse and conceal themselves. It was a skill they had practised over a long time period living in the dunes.

While blame has been aimed at Monty for not being able to catch up with Rommel fast enough, this argument assumes Rommel was easy to catch up with, which he was not – even Rommel's own troops had trouble catching up with him. It also ignores the administrative difficulties Monty began to face during the pursuit.

As the Fox returned to the Sahara seeking refuge, the desert seemed to endorse his effort. Dust storms kicked up with strong winds, providing Rommel's troops with much-needed concealment. On the heels of the blowing sand came heavy rainstorms in early and mid-November. Storms were a godsend to Rommel. Even as a young man in the First World War, he had welcomed storms as a gift – as 'attack weather', he had claimed with enthusiasm in his First World War memoir, or as concealment for movement. He embraced the winds and rain as a chance to elude his foes and drove his men harder amid the raging elements.

Abandoning all semblance of caution, Monty gave chase with ferocity. Riding on the wings of blazing martial pride and thirsting to annihilate his foe, he went stampeding after Rommel like one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – stretching the Eighth Army's supply lines severely in the process. The British troops were exhausted after the brutal battle of El Alamein but Monty drove them onward with uncharacteristic remorselessness. Had Monty been a war leader in ancient or medieval times, this would have been the point where he would have ridden Rommel down with sword aloft and taken his head. In a metaphorical sense that was what Monty hoped to achieve in his mad dash on Rommel's heels.

In the immediate aftermath of El Alamein, the rain thwarted British efforts. Much to Monty's fury, the ground turned to mush in front of his eyes and his army began staggering. Many of the desert tracks became

impassable. Furthermore, the Eighth Army was venturing across ground that Rommel's troops had already torn up with their own vehicles and rendered even more rutted, soupy and hellish to navigate than a regular soaked patch of trackless desert. Torrential rains produced floods throughout mid-November that became gushing brown rivers across the loose sand and swept British vehicles off roads.

While the men of the Afrika Korps had adapted under Rommel's almost tribal leadership to living and fighting non-stop in the most hostile desert environments, the newly-minted Eighth Army struggled against the bare force of the elements. British trucks were wrecked. Columns ground to a halt. Montgomery fumed. Temporarily forced to accept that the troops could not attain much speed following his spectacular victory, Monty was compelled to slow his pursuit temporarily, a bit like Washington Irving's galloping Hessian ghost who would ride down travellers with terrifying force but was unable to cross a particular bridge. But unlike the legendary ghost, Monty would overcome his obstacles and persist in trampling after Rommel with the intent to crush him. Despite British supply concerns, he relentlessly continued his chase as Rommel withdrew across the Egyptian border back into Libya. In attempts to maintain the continuity of his supply line, Monty would sometimes pause to reconnect his lead troops with his dislocated rear area before sending forward elements ahead again to strike at Rommel like a serpent.

Rommel himself was painfully aware of his vulnerability and the resolve of his ruthless enemy to hunt him down. He made his moves at night, his own vehicle often faltering and getting stuck in sand dunes. With great embitterment, he watched stretches of desert flash by where he and his troops had once celebrated victories with pride. The German and Italian troops were battered and exhausted, as was Rommel himself.

The Siege That Wasn't

Having developed an idea of the British character as a cautious one, Rommel at first underestimated Monty's resolve to grapple with him again. Initially Rommel planned to hole up in the coastal city of Tobruk, Libya,

where rugged Australian troops had previously caused him a significant amount of trouble during not one but two sieges. The Desert Fox believed he could repeat the Australian performance. ‘We intended to hold Tobruk for as long as possible’, Rommel wrote. He sent communications to Germany asking for materiel to be sent to Tobruk to aid in its defence.

Monty was too fast for him. The Eighth Army appeared on the horizon much more quickly than Rommel expected. Faced with the prospect of another pitched battle, Rommel abandoned the fortress post-haste and watched with bitterness as Monty swallowed Tobruk, once his prized trophy.

Rommel attempted to console himself by claiming later that Tobruk only had ‘symbolic value’ at that point, which contradicts his earlier statements of determination to hold the fortress. In fact Rommel arguably could have improved his fortunes had he decided to invest in Tobruk’s defence, as he was better aware than most of its potential to last during a siege and the opportunities it presented to repel invaders. It was also located on the coast, which would have presented Axis forces with better opportunities to supply him steadily had he decided to base himself there instead of fleeing across the wilderness. Despite the defensive potential of Tobruk, which he well understood, he refused to make any effort to hold the city. It fell into British hands and afterwards became a supply hub for Montgomery that allowed him to alleviate some strain from his already stretched supply line.

Above all, Rommel was showing himself to be risk-averse. It was Montgomery who was now invested in mobile warfare – Monty who was spoiling for another fight and ready to come to blows. The usually innovative Rommel was now making every effort to evade battle. He blamed his supply situation for his decisions – despite the fact that his army now had the full attention of Axis political leaders and his material situation was improving as he regained closer proximity to Italian-held cities in Libya.

Was Rommel’s military situation truly as hopeless as he insisted it was, or did he refuse to fight because, underneath his despair, he was too proud to risk losing again and falling into enemy hands? While he would later

level accusations of over-cautiousness at Montgomery, his own decisions to flee headlong at any sign of Montgomery's approach were anything but audacious or enterprising.

Habitually relying on deception, surprise and cunning to succeed, Rommel tended to be naturally cautious in defence. Montgomery, with his taste for violent scrapping and love of sheer force, was the brash one. The differences in their personalities were never more apparent than during this lengthy Saharan pursuit.

Desert Caravans

Throughout November and early December, Monty was able to overtake and knock out some of Rommel's forces piecemeal as he pursued his enemy across the Egyptian border and into Libya. Among the troops Monty overran were three German artillery batteries, a battalion of the Italian motorized Pistoia Division, the Italian X Corps plus troops formerly commanded by Italian general Annibale Bergonzoli, who ironically bore the name of the renowned ancient commander Hannibal of North Africa who had become famous by besting the Romans. Bergonzoli, nicknamed 'General Electric Whiskers', had been captured by Australian forces in February 1941 before Rommel had begun fighting in the desert. However, Bergonzoli remained present in the desert in an unusual way – he had owned a roomy caravan which offered a workspace plus a built-in bathroom. Monty used it as his 'office caravan' in North Africa and throughout the war, furnishing it comfortably.

It would not be the only caravan to be used as a trophy by Monty. In May 1943, he captured another one along with Italian Field Marshal Giovanni Messe, who said that the caravan had been used by Rommel. This caravan was a spacious sleeping truck. It had a built-in bed with a mattress. It offered privacy and comfort. It also had small wooden steps that could be let down like a tiny ladder to get in and out of the back of the caravan. This caravan was another one of Rommel's prized possessions in North Africa. It could fairly be called one of his treasures. One of the few places where the hyperactive Rommel managed to get any sleep, it became an inner sanctum

where he found some measure of peace. He took it everywhere, wrote to his wife about how wonderful it was, sometimes attached a tent to its exterior where he could sit and talk with his officers, and posed outside of it for a photo wearing shorts. Montgomery wasted no time in moving in. The caravan then became one of Monty's prized possessions – not entirely because of its comfort, but also because it was, for Monty, a battle trophy wrested from the hands of his defeated enemy. The pugnacious Monty likely derived extra joy from the caravan knowing that Rommel had once slept there and had been thrown out at his hands.

These two caravans would become Monty's nests for the remainder of the war and indeed for some time afterward. Today both captured caravans are in the Imperial War Museum. It is unknown whether Rommel ever discovered what happened to his beloved sleeping truck. Montgomery later posed for publicity photos outside of his caravans, so it is certainly possible that Rommel became aware of its fate. This would have been yet another time that Monty trampled on Rommel's pride – not to mention that Monty would later deliberately mock his vanquished enemy by naming a small fluffy dog after him, which was widely publicized by the Allied press during the war.

Dirty Tricks

Yet despite their justifiable pride in beating Rommel, things in the desert were far from easy for Monty and the Eighth Army. With speed and skilled manoeuvres, the Axis troops, particularly the German units, proved continuously able to escape destruction against death-defying odds. The cunning and tenacity they displayed during their retreat is a testament to the formidable desert warfare skills Rommel had imbued in them.

Dirty tricks also helped Rommel get away. 'Throughout our retreat we called on all our resources of imagination to provide the enemy with ever more novel booby traps', Rommel wrote, adding that this was done to terrorise the forward elements of Monty's army and deter them from following quickly. 'Our Engineer Commander, General [Karl] Bülowius, one of the best engineers in the army, did a splendid job.' Bülowius would

later be captured in North Africa and commit suicide in US captivity in 1945. However during his relatively brief career in the desert, Bülowius succeeded in dreaming up devilish inventions that wreaked nightmares on unsuspecting soldiers – maiming, flaying, mutilating and killing them with ghastly efficiency. He was good at disguising explosives. Harmless objects such as ration tins or cigarette boxes left lying around triggered grisly blasts. British troops once tripped a lethal booby trap by flicking a light switch in a vacant building. Artfully laid mines also continued to menace the Eighth Army. The 'Devil's Gardens' had become mobile and served as Rommel's rearguard.

These tactics were brutal. They might seem uncharacteristic of Rommel, who had a naturally calm and easy-going disposition even despite his flair for unconventional moves and aptitude for engineering. Yet Rommel was desperate at this point. When backed into a corner, he was more than willing to use mines and booby traps to serve his goals. Letting these 'machines' do the work of destruction, in his view, would spare his own troops' lives and terrify his opponents, thus allowing him to profit by frightening his enemy.

Moreover the war in North Africa was not entirely, as has been suggested, a totally 'gentlemanly' conflict in which no ruthless acts ever occurred between the warring parties. On the British side of the fence, the unconventional fighters of the Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment had been attacking Rommel using asymmetrical methods since 1941. Venturing far behind the lines, they had committed acts of sabotage, destroying communications, blowing up planes in airfields and killing German and Italian personnel. Famed SAS leader Robert Blair 'Paddy' Mayne had notoriously gunned down unarmed Axis pilots in a mess hall in Libya. On one occasion an SAS raider is said to have tossed a grenade through an open window of a building being used by the Germans as an office and yelled, 'Catch!' to the helpless officer sitting at the desk inside. The exploits of the SAS, in which they often resorted to brutal methods, are well-documented.

Rommel detested the SAS, although he admitted they caused enormous damage to his army. He sometimes mistakenly identified them as members

of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), of which German intelligence was evidently aware and knew the name of, or simply as ‘commandos’. Eventually he would mention the 1st SAS Regiment by name when noting that its leader, Lieutenant Colonel David Stirling, was captured in 1943; this knowledge may have been due to the fact that Stirling freely babbled details about the regiment to a German informant in captivity. There is no evidence in Rommel’s writings to suggest he ever referred to Stirling as ‘the Phantom Major’. Rommel believed the SAS were no better than thugs and resented the British for permitting what he called ‘gangster’ methods in warfare. When speaking to British POWs personally after they were captured, Rommel was known to challenge them about the commandos’ methods. It is a testament to Rommel’s ethical principles that, despite his personal antipathy towards the saboteurs, he did not murder captured British Special Forces men despite being permitted to do so by Hitler’s Commando Order, which called for him to execute disguised ‘commandos’ on the spot. Stirling’s life was also spared.

Montgomery had less tolerance for the SAS’s freedom of action than his predecessor Auchinleck. While Auchinleck was desperate for new ideas, Monty had plenty of ideas of his own and was too controlling of a personality to tolerate a self-led saboteur unit running wild under his nose. He had no patience for the breezy aristocrat Stirling who was keen to have a seat at the command table ‘just because’ and wished to continue doing whatever he wanted. Stirling despised Monty and did his utmost to avoid having to obey him – efforts at independence which naturally did not end well under Monty’s iron gaze. After Stirling was captured in 1943, Monty would make no attempt to secure his release and instead neatly took the SAS into his grip for the remainder of the war. He would transform the SAS into a more regulated fighting force under his authority and eventually use it as an advance guard to great success in Italy and North-west Europe. A key element to this success was the promotion of Blair ‘Paddy’ Mayne to take charge of the unit after Stirling’s capture, a role in which Mayne excelled due to his professionalism, aptitude for management, leadership talents and willingness to work methodically and collaboratively with the

army instead of against it. Monty would later personally recommend Mayne for a Victoria Cross.

During Rommel's retreat from El Alamein, SAS units were racing ahead of British lines to harass the fleeing Germans. Rommel at this stage was in a particularly resentful frame of mind. He had been decisively smashed on the battlefield for the first time in his entire life and had, perhaps somewhat prematurely, lost hope of regaining the upper hand. Fleeing in the face of his foe, he watched his victories in the desert unravel before his eyes daily. Physically he continued to be unwell and his insomnia was reaching a fever pitch. It was unsurprising in these circumstances, and taking his past grievances with the SAS into consideration, that he had no problem dealing out gruesome destruction to advancing British forces in the form of dreadful mines and booby traps left artfully scattered in the dust of his retreat.

CHAPTER 7

THE GHOSTS OF EL AGHEILA

‘His spectre sits at the door or cave,
And the homeless hear with a thrill of fear
The sound of his wind-swept voice on the air.’

Hamlin Garland, *The Gaunt Gray Wolf*

The tide of war had dragged both opponents from the lap of the Nile and rolled them into the great chasm of the Sahara, beyond the reach of civilization. This was an abyss. The only distinct feature that marked where Egypt ended and Libya began was a long thorny wall of barbed wire creaking in the windswept nothingness, meant as a border wall but in reality a hollow symbol of human effort to own a raging sea of sand that no man could claim. Beyond this empty tangle of wire was a vast, shifting ocean of heat and skirling dust. The Sahara had its variations, and the desert on the Libyan side of the border had an even wilder side than the treacherous, salty rifts of Egypt’s Western Desert. Here the sand piled into higher dunes and

mixed treacherously with rocky steppes and stony cliffs. The sea ran parallel to the wasteland all across the North African coastline, but in Libya the gap between the Mediterranean and the rugged desert narrowed into a thin belt. This had proved to be a choking point for vehicle traffic.

It is easy to lose track not only of time but also distance in the desert. Because of its sheer emptiness, locations can appear farther away or closer than they really are. With no cities or obstacles to navigate around, one can hopscotch across large distances at a relatively fast pace – provided of course that the desert, with all its caprices of weather and terrain, allows. It is easy for an army to plunge too deeply into the alluring freedom of the wilderness and in so doing sever its umbilical cord of a supply line which connects it to the rest of the world, keeping it fed, equipped and mobile. Without a supply chain to provide for its human needs, an army cannot fight indefinitely – especially not in a place as hostile as the Sahara.

The supply problem was one that both generals would handle differently. By his innovative and hardy nature, Rommel was better able to get along with less. Like a dangerous spider hanging from an airy thread, Rommel had been able to stretch his line of supply to a thin strand while darting in and out of unexpected corners of the desert and weaving effective webs of destruction. Montgomery had not initially needed to expand his own supply line and did not expect to have to contend with this issue. Yet as Rommel, soundly beaten but not vanquished, shrank back into the chasm of the desert, Monty was aggressive enough to plunge in headlong after him – diving off the edge of the unknown and stretching his own bungee cord of supply to its limit in an attempt to eradicate his enemy.

The two warring armies covered a distance of nearly 600 miles from El Alamein in Egypt to the Libyan port city of Benghazi in a mere 13 days. To onlookers it might have seemed like Rommel was on the back foot. The Desert Fox had exited Egypt and was fleeing so quickly that it looked like he would never succeed in reasserting his strength again. Yet that was not decided. Loath to be pinned down, Rommel sought to get to the refuge of a familiar place where he knew he could reorganize and which would offer him the freedom of movement he craved. The western region of Libya was

not as far removed from Egypt as one might imagine – indeed, it was Rommel's springboard into Egypt, and had served as such twice before.

The Tables Turn Again

A strange reversal of fortune began taking place. The further Rommel withdrew from Monty, the more strength returned to him. He was closer to Italian-held territory in Libya where he had first started out from. His supply line was no longer a thread but a stream that was turning into a river. In mid-November he received supplies flown in by the Luftwaffe which provided him with sufficient fuel to withdraw further into Libya. Although transport ships were still being sunk in the Mediterranean, the Italians managed to have over 1,000 tons of fuel delivered to Tripoli throughout November. By mid-November a supply of 500 tons had already been unloaded at the port and was en route to be handed over to Rommel at his old stronghold of El Agheila, where he was beginning to construct fortified defences. In the near future Rommel would be getting more tanks, more troops and more ammunition. In Rommel's opinion, this was too little, too late. Nevertheless he did not have as much to fear as before.

For Montgomery, however, 'the advance was becoming sticky', as he put it. The farther he stretched his supply line, the weaker it became, and the more vulnerable his troops were. It was harder for him to bring up reinforcements. If attacked suddenly, his troops could easily become dislocated and seriously harmed before extra strength in manpower, ammunition or fuel could reach them. And Rommel was a pro at suddenly wheeling to exploit enemy weaknesses. Monty tried sending tendrils of advance guards forward to lash at Rommel in efforts not to overstrain the main body of his overextended force, but inevitably was too impatient to maintain this approach and followed Rommel up more quickly than his supply line was ready for.

At first Monty was confident enough in diving into the dune ocean after Rommel and trying to catch him. However, the farther out to sea Monty went, the more painfully aware he became of the predatory gaze of Rommel focusing on him in his isolation, and the more worried Monty became. His

worry was justifiable. Montgomery was a resourceful warrior to be certain, but he was a fish out of water when it came to nomadic warfare in the wasteland.

Fighting off the cuff and with sparse resources was Rommel's forte. He loved the bizarre haunts of the desert that other people hated. Here in the wilds of Libya, Rommel had seen his greatest successes. It was a forbidding landscape – the sun's anvil. Choppy dune seas and mountainous drifts of sand defined the area, interspersed with fields of jagged rocks and stone embankments that jutted unexpectedly from the ground. It seemed like a place where no man could live, let alone fight. But Rommel had lived and fought here, roaming day and night in a fleet of open vehicles, prowling with his binoculars, bobbing up in unexpected places and striking hard with deadly force under cover of sandstorms and illusions created by his tanks and trucks. He loved this hellish kaleidoscope of the Sahara. He had sliced to ribbons British formations who had dared to follow him here.

He knew it. So did Monty. And so did their troops. Rommel decided to start to dig in at a familiar place – the El Agheila position. The pursuit began to slow, and as it did, the atmosphere of the campaign began to change from one of frenzied motion to an eerie tense quiet.

Wrecked Hopes

By early December, Montgomery was distinctly uncomfortable. He had presumed too much in his stampede to overtake Rommel. He thought Rommel was weak enough to succumb to a deathblow in the wake of their first knockout round at El Alamein, not fully appreciating the formidable talents of the enemy he was up against. He was learning very quickly that Rommel was not called the Desert Fox for nothing.

The desert had bedevilled Monty's advance. Rommel continued to move under cover of sandstorms. Powerful rainstorms in mid-November knocked British forward troops and supply columns out of action. That was not even taking the fundamentals of supply into consideration. For all his organizational skills, Monty did not like to involve himself in the fine details of staff work; that was where his carefully chosen subordinates were

expected to step in. Monty was very much the monarch of his army and took a thorough and top-down approach to everything, but he did not want to have to meddle with what he viewed as annoying details and demanded instead to be kept abreast of things at a high level. ‘During the early stage of the advance, the administrative staff of Eighth Army had control of the railhead or port on which the Army was mainly based and of the entire area in front of it. GHQ Middle East Forces assumed control progressively in the rear. Rear Army Headquarters had necessarily to be located near the main railhead or port. This meant a separation in distance which sometimes exceeded 200 miles between Rear Army Headquarters and Main Army Headquarters’, Montgomery noted. To this was added the problem of supplying and maintaining the forward units he brought up with him to strike blows at Rommel.

Not wanting to lose momentum, the high-spirited Montgomery had continued his ride after Rommel – and, a bit like his enemy, expected his supply line to straighten out and necessities to ‘catch up’ with him in due course. While he sometimes sent smaller advance guard units to harass Rommel to avoid overstraining his main force – as he did during his approach towards Benghazi and Agedabia – he was too impatient to hold off for long and inevitably kept moving forward. In a testament to how hot-headed Monty was being at this point in time, he prioritized his pursuit of Rommel while the already lagging staff were expected to get their act together, sharpish. Yet the much-desired ‘catching up’ did not happen at the time he most needed it.

Of his approach to battle plans, Monty wrote that he felt the risk was worth taking, writing that ‘if a commander loses his battle, the defeat will be the more serious if he had held reserves forward which fall into the enemy’s plans. On the other hand, if he wins this battle, he will not be able to take advantage of victory unless he has such reserves.’ He added cockily: ‘I have always planned on the assumption of success.’ This neat sentence captures his philosophy to war: a commander or soldier who had already considered the possibility of defeat was in Monty’s view already half vanquished. However Monty’s assumptions, or least hopes, towards success

in stopping Rommel proved to be disappointed due to weather and the sheer speed of Rommel during the chase. This would require him to recalibrate.

Stranded knee-deep in the dune sea of Libya tethered to a very thin rope of support, Monty became acutely aware of the fact that his supply lifeline was distended beyond not only his comfort zone but nearly beyond working order. If he didn't do something to address this quickly, he would be left dangling at the end of that line with the shark-like forces of Rommel ready to come in for a heavy bite at his exposed forward troops.

Despite his concerns, Monty pressed on – taking a gamble by placing his hopes in the Libyan port city of Benghazi. As Rommel left a trail of disruption and continuously escaped by slipping out of tight corners like an octopus, he abandoned Benghazi in his wake. German troops of the 90th Light Division had pulled out on 16 November amid torrential rain that lasted for days and swept the British off the roads and staggered their advance. Due to the rain, the British did not capture the city until 20 November.

In a testament to his daring spirit, Montgomery personally spearheaded the advance on Benghazi, following his leading armoured cars with the protection of a small escort. 'We had outstripped the fighter cover and from time to time enemy aircraft strafed the road', he remembered, confessing, 'It was not a healthy place and I suppose I ought not to have been there.' But the fact was that Monty was still eager to thrash Rommel and couldn't resist leading the chase. On a different occasion, but driving behind his forward troops in the same brash manner during his pursuit of Rommel, he narrowly avoided being captured or killed when his escort ran into a German rearguard and got into a firefight.

Slightly surprised by how easily the enemy gave up Benghazi, Monty expected to find some supplies worth salvaging and above all the port working. This was something he had banked on by venturing out so far. With Benghazi in his pocket, he reasoned, he could have supplies delivered directly to his forward area and get the lifeblood of material pumping strongly into the lead troops of his army again.

Yet the ugly scene he found in Benghazi left Monty not only crestfallen but utterly appalled. Feeling not only harassed but vindictive in their

withdrawal, Rommel's forces had savaged Benghazi. The engineers of Bülowius had used their dark genius to make sure nothing worked the way it was supposed to. Equipment had been blown up, wrenched out of order, dismantled and all-out sabotaged in every conceivable and inconceivable way. Absolutely none of the port facilities were functional, and the amount of damage was such that repairs would take not weeks, but many months.

Rommel had ordered Benghazi's port facilities wrecked not only to deny Monty supplies but because he feared the British Royal Navy would land troops there in the immediate future. Ironically the Germans had supply reserves there as well as additional vehicles. Rommel hoped to retrieve as much materiel as possible and cart things off into the desert, but being unable to do so before Monty's arrival, opted to have much of it destroyed to prevent it from falling into British hands. Rommel did manage to retrieve some of the supplies for his own use, however. As explosions rocked the harbour and the port was sabotaged beyond recognition, a mass panic broke out among the citizens of Benghazi which Rommel described as 'unprecedented'. Why did Rommel make no attempts to keep the British away from this key city and recover more supplies? His eyes were fixed on the dunes near El Agheila. His troops had begun digging defensive positions there. That was where he was prepared to make a stand.

In Benghazi, Monty stood amid the desolation near the harbour and looked down grimly with his hands in his pockets – a striking scene that a wartime photographer, who could hardly have comprehended the worries then on the general's mind, captured. Monty's supply crisis was beyond the pale now. 'The bulk of our supplies had to be brought by road from Tobruk until the port of Benghazi could be got working at full pressure, and this task became a matter of urgent priority', he wrote. 'The next task of the Eighth Army was to face up to the enemy, build up the administrative situation while preparing to attack him and then once more drive him back to the west.'

At the same time, the RAF's Desert Air Force was now demanding a greater share of available fuel for their own operations independent of the Eighth Army's advance. This hampered Montgomery's access to available British resources and put a further strain on his army.

The Haunted Sand Sea

Montgomery didn't believe in letting worry show to his troops. One of his policies was to 'radiate confidence', as he described it, in order to inspire others around him. Sometimes this gave people the impression he was unduly cocky. However Monty had his fair share of private worries. In North Africa, his real crisis of faith would come as he approached the El Agheila position.

El Agheila, referred to as Mersa el-Brega by the Germans, was Rommel's stronghold. It had been since the outset of the desert war. Small coastal towns could change hands like bartered goods, miles could be sieved back and forth like sand in an endlessly flipping hourglass, but one thing in this roofless temple to the gods of chaos had remained the same: El Agheila belonged to Rommel. By all outward appearances the place was one of the most brutally rugged stretches of no-man's land that existed in western Libya and was fit to belong to nobody. Powdery sand piled into high dunes, gullies were deep, rocks were plentiful – and so were sandstorms and mirages. The detriments that made it rough country for human beings to function in, not to mention tanks and vehicles, were boons to Rommel, who had a rare gift for turning what others saw as hardships to his own advantage. He had gladly snatched the spot from Wavell's men in 1941 and nobody had been able to turn him out of it. Whoever approached Rommel at El Agheila had learned to regret it. Although initially he seemed to be disappearing into the dunes, he would inevitably regain terrifying momentum in the sandy ether and come swinging back like a boomerang.

While he didn't let on, Montgomery was dreading what might happen if the Desert Fox managed to get a firm footing in his old lair again. Monty's secret fears adds another dimension to why he made so many wild efforts to cut off Rommel's escape at the expense of his own administration. Despite having become familiar with Rommel's behavioural tendencies due to his emphasis on psychology, Monty – like most everyone else, including the German High Command – found it difficult to predict what actions Rommel would take during the retreat and had no idea what he was thinking. For his part, Monty seems to have supposed Rommel was deliberately making a

mad dash to get to El Agheila because he knew he stood a fighting chance there. Interestingly, Monty referred to the pursuit from El Alamein as one ‘to El Agheila’, adding he believed that ‘Rommel would undoubtedly withdraw to that position and would endeavour to stop us there’. Monty described the El Agheila as a ‘sand sea’ through which few paths existed. ‘I did not think we would have any serious fighting till we reached Agheila’, he wrote, estimating that ‘so long as Rommel held the area he could hold up our advance, or alternatively could debouch at will against us.’

Monty admitted he hoped to cut Rommel off before he achieved this objective. Yet despite every effort of the Eighth Army to trip him before he reached the finish line, the resilient Rommel had indeed made it, albeit skidding in a mad dash, to the goal Monty had hoped to prevent him from arriving at.

Contrary to Monty’s assumptions, Rommel had been improvising the entire time. He didn’t like to operate according to what he called ‘fixed ideas’, and habitually kept his plans in flux. Firm plans were for dull thinkers, in Rommel’s worldview. From a military standpoint he much preferred to knock down others’ sand castles rather than imagine his own castles in the sky. Keeping an eye on larger strategic aims, he would freely adapt all actions in the interim to get to his final goal. Nothing was ever fixed or permanent. That is what made Rommel such a formidable desert fighter. His particular mindset was especially well-suited to an environment that was so fickle. He did not have his heart set on getting back to El Agheila during the pursuit. In fact, as a point of pride, he would have preferred not to retreat a step farther than necessary. He considered settling in for a siege at Tobruk. But his decisions depended on other factors – he wanted to be well-armed and situated in an ideal position before he had to deal with Montgomery again.

Therefore he continuously gave ground until the only promising option seemed to be El Agheila. He knew the place well and liked it. He was also aware he had managed to frighten the British away from there twice before, and that aspect of enemy intimidation likely also suited him. He wasted no time in having his troops start digging in. ‘The enemy was preparing to turn

and face us in the area where twice before our forces had been brought to a halt', wrote Montgomery.

The Eighth Army balked. It had been a fairly happy ride all the way from El Alamein into Libya. The might of the Axis in Africa seemed to be broken. Spirits in Britain were jubilant; Rommel was now being poked fun at on the radio and Montgomery was being hailed as the conquering hero. Instead of German Panzers roaring across the open desert, people were now seeing the triumphant tanks of the Eighth Army on the offensive in newsreels. It was a refreshing change for the Allies. The mood was high not only at home but among the men of the Eighth Army. Unfortunately for the troops, this new confidence was built on glass. They had embraced Monty wholeheartedly and for now he was their victorious Caesar. But if Monty was Caesar, then Rommel was Hannibal – or perhaps Genghis Khan. Although he seemed to be reeling from the first round of the fight, he had accumulated a fearsome reputation over the years as an ominous and volatile presence. He was still mobile, still alive, and still the same formidable Rommel who never stopped stunning everybody with his unpredictable feats of strength and cleverness.

The formerly smiling British soldiers began to become grim as the El Agheila position loomed ahead. For them the place was sinister and boded ill. Many of them could remember dark scenes that had spilled out over those same shimmering stretches of wasteland – burning vehicles crackling with flame and smoke, the sand shuddering with bursts of artillery fire, broken bodies sprawled on the barren dirt and Rommel's tanks coming after them like shadows of death through a haze of dust. They remembered getting sudden orders to flee at all costs. They vividly recalled the panic that overcame them as they had piled into trucks or fled on foot to the thunder of guns and a shaky wall of sand stirred by rolling Panzers approaching in the distance.

Monty had not witnessed these events himself. But he could see them reflected in the eyes of his men. 'As we approached the Agheila position I sensed a feeling of anxiety in the ranks', he noted. 'Many had been there twice already, and twice Rommel had … driven them back.' The lurking apprehension crept throughout the whole Eighth Army like a silent fog,

overtaking the troops and oppressing Montgomery's subordinate commanders and even members of his own staff. His officers, he observed, succumbed to 'a feeling of depression'. He referred to the place as a 'dreaded' position.

The mysterious alliance Rommel had forged with the raw powers of the desert had not been forgotten. This wizard of the wilderness had seemingly cast a spell on El Agheila. Even the echoing wisps of his past triumphs were enough to destroy the courage of men who had just achieved a massive victory and had every right to be confident. Instead they began to cower before the very eyes of their successful new commander. This place was haunted – if not by an unearthly spirit, then by the powerful ghost of the many painful memories forged there. Monty referred to this spooky phenomenon as 'the Agheila bogey'.

Monty himself was not immune to it either. It was true that Rommel was weakened, but even a small animal can become formidable when trapped or backed into a corner. Above all, Montgomery himself felt weak. As a result of his hot-headedness, he was now dangling from the end of an overstretched supply line on Rommel's turf and in front of Rommel's nose. In the past Rommel had demonstrated a skilled knack for lopping off the heads of advancing forces that poked their forward elements out too far ahead of their main body. That was the situation Monty now found himself in. He was overextended and felt intensely vulnerable. He believed Rommel was an intelligent enough predator to scent the faint whiff of the Eighth Army's blood in the water. Would he come in for the kill?

PART III

IN SHIFTING SANDS

CHAPTER 8

WITH ONE HAND TIED BEHIND THEIR BACKS

‘Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.’

T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

A battle at El Agheila was perilously risky to both generals for several reasons. In a strategic sense, El Agheila was a key portal for movement into Egypt. Although not directly sited on the Libyan-Egyptian border, its difficult geographic features and location near the coastal road made it an ideal defensive spot from which Rommel could easily launch his tanks over the border – or if Monty managed to beat him, prevent him from doing so. El Agheila was a mere eight hours from the Egyptian border. This was only a day’s drive which could be completed from sunrise to sunset, or even faster depending on speed and circumstances. Rommel had used it as his

port of call for incursions into Egypt before. Monty expected that, if a suitable opportunity arose, Rommel would attempt a repeat performance. Rommel, as usual, was keeping his options open.

Monty's Apprehensions

For Monty, the terrain presented a major problem. As at El Alamein, Rommel had attempted to wedge his army into a safe spot where it would be difficult for Monty to poke at him. This area, which Monty referred to as 'the Agheila bottleneck', was a wedge between the seacoast and desert. 'The Agheila position was naturally very strong. It covered the area of desert between the sea, just west of Marsa Brega [Mersa el Brega] and the Wadi Fareg [Wadi el Farigh] – which formed a difficult obstacle running east and west', according to Monty.

The coastline formed a shield protecting the left flank of Rommel's army from being encroached upon. Nearly 120 miles of desert formed an open door to the right flank – but what a door it was. Heaping sand dunes, sandstone, rocky gullies, ravines, and sheer vacuums of dust that would suck in and trap heavy vehicles hindered various avenues of approach. An additional obstacle was the Wadi el Farigh, which was no typical oasis. Its long ridgelines created a steep dry riverbed which cut a snaking, gravelly swathe across the earth – a natural tank trap. Rommel's operating base was conveniently sited in a spot between all of these environmental obstacles. The Fox had again squeezed himself into the most difficult place for anybody to reach. As usual, he had planted a screen of deadly explosive booby traps and mines – in 'immense quantities', according to Monty – to further weave a protective web around himself.

These limitations hindered Monty's ability to draw up a plan that would catch Rommel off guard. If Rommel expected an assault to unfold in a particular manner, things were liable to get harrowing for the Eighth Army; surprise was key. How to surprise an alert man hiding in a corner with only one or two predictable ways of getting at him was a difficult matter. Monty could ask the Royal Air Force to bomb Rommel – as they had been doing consistently – but, as demonstrated before, during and after El Alamein,

bombings and strafings alone were not enough to completely annihilate the enemy forces.

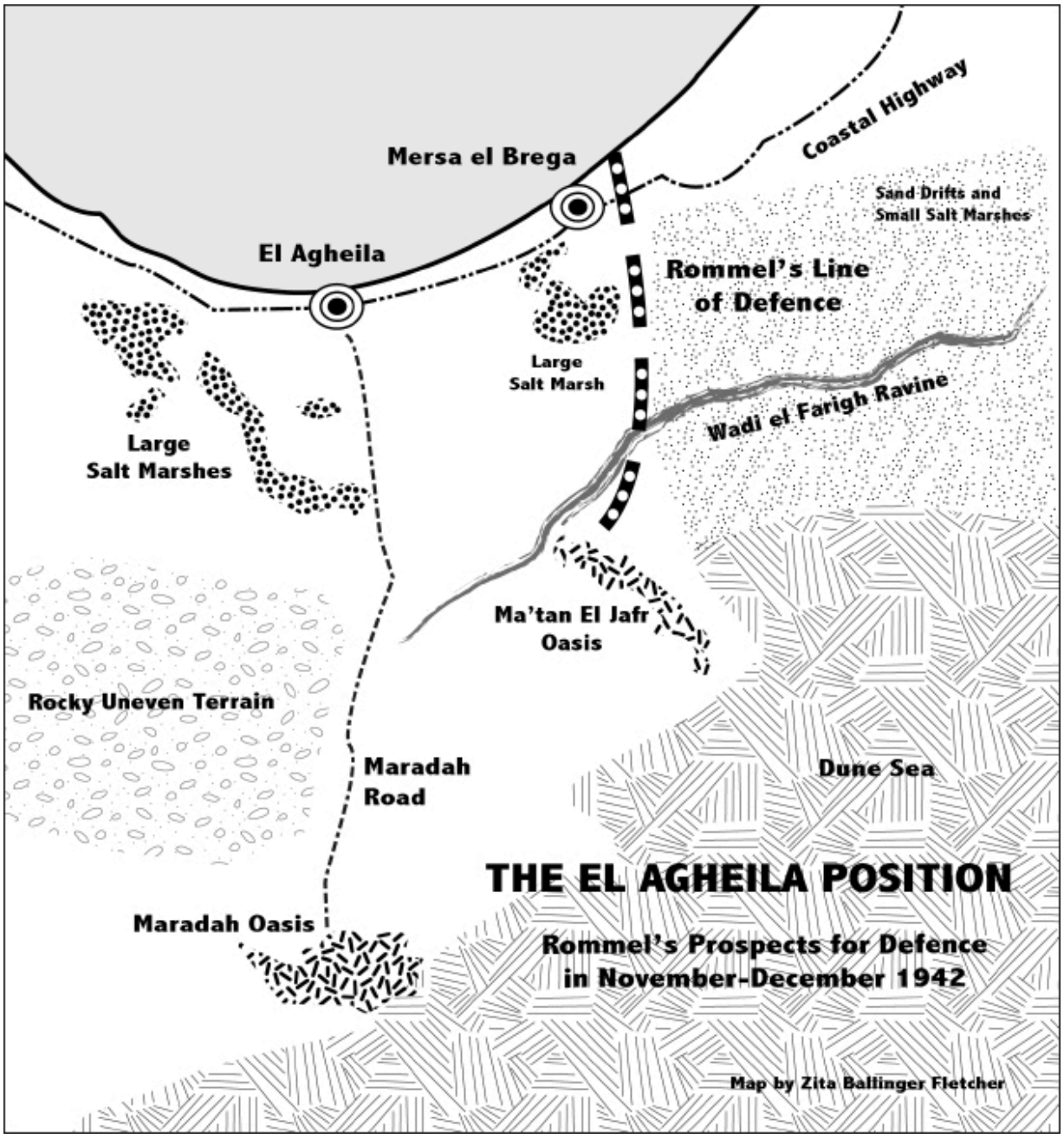
The second major problem facing Monty was his aforementioned supply crisis. Yes, the Eighth Army was strong. It was well-trained. Monty had led it magnificently. He and his troops had thrashed Rommel all across the coastline of North Africa. But Montgomery was ill at ease. Although a swashbuckler, he was by nature a very systematic man, and he was more than a little dismayed that his military situation was now distinctly out of order. This was entirely a result of his own doing.Although a highly professional, thoughtful and sometimes coldly intelligent man, Monty had a naturally passionate disposition and was not beyond being impulsive or emotional. Below the surface of his maturity, he was still the same boisterous ruffian who had tackled an armed German to take him prisoner, turned games of rugby into impromptu mixed martial arts matches and had once walloped fellow cadets with fire pokers. His efforts to nab Rommel on the run were impetuous and had left him practically stranded. To his credit, Montgomery had managed to keep things fairly well organized during his advance. He was also satisfied with the gains he had made during the chase. It was a fine achievement to have laid low the mighty Rommel and hounded him clear across the African continent as though he were a fleeing rodent. But Rommel, a master of mobility and deception, had managed to elude him, which put a damper on Montgomery's élan and left him chagrined about the situation in which he now found himself.

Later on when describing events in North Africa, he made what seemed to be an understated acknowledgement that he had got ahead of himself. 'There is always a tendency, natural and indeed laudable, on the part of keen commanders to edge forward as far as possible at all times. When administration is strained this tendency must be checked; it prevents the accumulation of reserves and it means the mounting of a powerful attack becomes impossible', he noted. This is exactly the scenario that had happened to him as his troops confronted Rommel at El Agheila.

He had every reason to be worried. The Eighth Army was now sprawled from one end of North Africa to the other and the forces spearheading its advance were weak. 'From Cairo to Tripoli is 1,600 miles by road … it was

as if GHQ were in London and the leading troops were in Moscow, with only one road joining them', Monty wrote of the long distances that his supply line needed to span. As he chased Rommel towards El Agheila, his administrative lifeline had been wrenched across 'a distance of 700 miles: equivalent to being disposed at Vienna and drawing stores in London with only one road available … My whole force was stretched administratively, relying largely on Tobruk, some 450 miles by road in the rear.'

Fuel that should have been available to the Eighth Army was not because the RAF were staking claims upon stores for their own independent objectives – hampering Monty's ability to advance at the same time the RAF paradoxically wanted Monty to secure additional forward airbases for them. 'We had to ensure that the Royal Air Force could develop the maximum effort in its many tasks … but it meant that I would be unable to start my operations against the Agheila position until mid-December', wrote Monty.



Map 2. The El Agheila Position. Rommel's Prospects for Defence in November-December 1942.

Other crucial factors at stake for Monty were the fighting spirit of the Eighth Army, his military reputation, world political opinion and also the future trajectory of the war. It had taken Monty's every effort to forge the Eighth Army into a confident and cohesive fighting force. Even if a mauling by Rommel would not destroy his army, it still had the potential at this stage to shatter the morale effect of Monty's achievements completely. Monty

had made promises to his men that they would never be turned back or defeated by Rommel again. If he failed them now, their trust in him would be broken forever and so would their belief in their own abilities. If sucker punched unexpectedly by Rommel, they could very well crumple in the desert. Possibly they might scatter in the wind and shirk back towards Egypt again – as they had so many times before. After all the hard work that Monty had expended to bring his army to this point, taking a heavy blow from Rommel would not only be humiliating but heartbreaking for him, and a heavy dash to the buoyed hopes of Great Britain. He could not allow it. He needed to prevail.

Correlated to the morale pitfall was the issue of potential casualties. A distended supply line hindered not only Monty's access to materiel, but fresh troops for the fight. At the moment he had no speedy way of bringing up reinforcements. Ever concerned for the welfare of his troops and for the confidence of his army, Monty did not want to see his available men thrown into a meat grinder. 'My next anxiety was the reinforcement situation. I could not at this stage risk a battle involving heavy casualties', he wrote.

In any case, Monty felt forced to prepare for a decisive duel with Rommel in this hellish environment. 'The problem was now to turn the enemy out of the El Agheila position as quickly as possible before he had time to perfect the organization of his defences', he wrote. 'I wanted to occupy the Agheila bottleneck myself … and thus ensure that the Axis forces would not hold the gateway to Cyrenaica a third time.'

Facing up to the battle, he described his situation as 'off balance'. Due to all the difficulties and restrictions facing him, Monty felt vulnerable. He would have to enter the fight with one hand tied behind his back.

The View From Monty's Binoculars

Problematically, there was no telling what Rommel might do. He had been temporarily hung out to dry by Hitler who was rather insulted about his lofty orders to hold El Alamein being circumvented. All manner of conflicting orders were being fired back and forth from Germany and Italy, which were of little help to British intelligence apart from the ongoing

business of sinking supply ships. Furthermore Rommel had never really stuck firmly to predetermined orders anyway. Montgomery had become pretty good at predicting Rommel's reactions and behaviour based on close scrutiny of his personality and actions, but during the retreat the panicking Rommel was reacting erratically and out of character, which made him difficult to predict.

So far Rommel had been skittish. He had evaporated from every location he had stopped in as soon as the mirage of Montgomery appeared on his horizon. It seemed his priority was pure escape. But for how long would this last? Did he have an end goal in mind? Monty suspected the Fox would try to reassert himself at El Agheila. Indeed Rommel had begun to nest in the area – he had tried to fortify approaches to it at Agedabia before deciding to pull back slightly farther. Now that Rommel was settling in, he seemed to have no logical reason not to be willing to fight a pitched battle – or, more likely, suddenly attack.

The lay of the land presented far from an ideal scenario. Rommel was not at his best when forced to fight on fairly static terms. He could deal out severe damage when confined, but confinement tended to work against him. Hindering Rommel's freedom of movement deprived him of his powers much like a bottled genie. The absolute worst-case scenario for anyone wanting to fight with Rommel and hoping to actually win was an open battlefield in rugged wilderness. Although he was hiding within a narrow strip at El Agheila, one of his flanks lay open to hundreds of miles of desert and gave him considerable wiggle room. Openness worked to his advantage. The desert was treacherous in the region but that suited him. Access to open ground and variables put the mathematical Rommel on an infinite plane in which he could freely calculate and recalculate his next moves and change them fluidly.

His troops were primed for fighting in these types of circumstances. While his staff had trouble keeping up with him, his men had learned the strange art of loose cohesion that he demanded of them like desert tribal warriors. Trained by Rommel the mountain ranger, they didn't melt in the sun or flag amid the force of the elements. As they had proven at El Alamein and countless times before, they could set their faces against not

only extreme heat, cold, grating sand and grime, but flames, shrapnel, blood and death and still – albeit starved and battered – not flinch from the fray.

Yet the Fox and his men were human, which Montgomery knew well. Even had they been favoured with some supernatural touch of immortality, Monty was a rebel who bowed to no one. He was banking on his enemies' insecurities, their lack of supplies and the obvious discouragement they must have felt following the defeat at El Alamein and the long chase. He believed their psychological discouragement could help him press his advantage to beat Rommel on his own turf.

A Bold Plan for the Eighth Army

Montgomery explored his front line at El Agheila personally at the end of November, carefully scanning the terrain. Rommel was indeed firmly wedged in a tough spot. Initially, Monty's plan of action would involve trying to chase Rommel out of his formidable sandy warren into a more open and accessible area with what he called 'bluff and manoeuvre'. He hoped to prod him out further into the open desert by making a few rushes at him. That was the only way the Eighth Army could really reach Rommel. The concept was like a hunter trying to flush a tiger or bear out of hiding for a clear shot.

'In view of the awkward country to the south and the difficulty of a frontal attack, it would obviously be preferable to manoeuvre Rommel out of the Agheila position and then attack him in the easier country to the west', Monty wrote. 'In view of the probably decline in morale in his forces, I thought this could be done if I did not delay too long.'

However, these tricks would not be so easy to accomplish due to the natural obstacles in the terrain. To even get his forces within striking distance of the enemy, Monty had to choose their routes of advance with the utmost precision. The desert was not only fickle but nearly impassable in some areas. One false estimate or errant order could see the British assault troops choke in mid-motion and get stuck floundering in the dune sea. The stakes were high for this battle – too high to invest only in feints.

Monty decided to go all in. He revised his initial plan in early December. It being impossible to advance through the Mediterranean to get at Rommel's left flank, there were only two choices left: charge the Fox's heavily-mined desert fortress head on, or try to swing around his right flank through the hazardous desert and hit him from an unguarded direction. Both options were risky. Instead of choosing between them, the bold Monty decided to undertake both at once. He would take a punch at Rommel straight down the coastal road. Another force would move alongside it, not quite in the worst of the open desert but just far out enough to draw Rommel's gaze from the deathblow. As usual Monty had a hidden but powerful coup de grace up his sleeve. This would be an outflanking manoeuvre that would pierce through the desert inferno to cut off Rommel's access to the coastal road from behind, thus totally encircling him. To avoid taking heavy casualties, Monty hoped he could also 'rely on artillery fire and air bombing, and keep my losses to a minimum'.

To give the sharpest edges to his fighting weapon, Monty brought forward some of his most tenacious troops. Leading the charge would be the 'Desert Rats' of the 7th Armoured Division. Like Rommel's troops, these men had been smelted and hammered into enduring warriors on the anvil of the desert since the beginning of the North African campaign. Their chosen emblem was the jerboa. The small but crafty jerboa, also known as the kangaroo rat, can be found all over the Sahara. It has remarkable powers of survival. The men of the 7th Armoured Division were hardened tank jockeys accustomed to harassing the Afrika Korps. These jerboas were more than a good match for Rommel's foxes. 'I brought forward Headquarters 30 Corps … 7 Armoured Division passed to command of 30 Corps', noted Monty. The Desert Rats would draw Rommel's eye and advance through the centre.

Added to their strength would be Monty's much-loved 51st Highland Division. He prized the Scottish troops for their unique combination of boldness and steadfastness in battle, and being Scots-Irish himself got along well with their soldiers. The 51st Highland Division had previously been humiliated by Rommel when he captured it wholesale at St. Valery in 1940 and afterwards needed to be reorganized from scratch. Keenly aware of this,

and feeling deep empathy for the sense of shame that the men had inherited, Monty showed special favour to the troops bearing the division's name. Apart from taking the Scots under his wing in terms of training and personal visits to them, he gave them opportunities to avenge themselves against Rommel by placing them in leading roles in key battles. They had a particularly prominent role in his victory at El Alamein and would forever consider their actions during that battle as among their finest moments; it wasn't the last time that Monty would dote upon them and provide opportunities for them to shine. His conscious efforts to help restore their honour succeeded. At El Agheila, he gave the Scots yet another chance to give Rommel a walloping. Their task was to charge straight down the coastal road and hit the Axis troops in the face. It was a task to which they were well disposed.

The dagger in Rommel's back was to be plunged in by the tough 2nd New Zealand Division. Having grown up in Australia, Monty was particularly fond of his ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand) troops as well. He related well to them – their boisterousness, their toughness, their sense of enterprise, and their sense of humour. In a pinch he knew he could rely on them to stand fast and deliver results. To the New Zealanders he entrusted the difficult task of getting through the burning abyss of sand bluffs and treacherous crags to sneak up on Rommel from behind and snap off his access to the coastal road. This would be more than challenging. Apart from the sandstone, gravel, billowing heaps of dust and all that came with it, somehow they needed to get past the formidable Wadi el Farigh riverbed. The route would be circuitous and Monty expected it might take them a while.

Monty developed these plans intently enough to have strong feelings against any part of it getting 'mucked about' by junior officers, as he put it. 'I knew well that, in the past, corps and divisional generals had had their own ideas about operations in the desert, and had not liked a firm grip from above; this was one reason why we had nearly lost Egypt', he wrote. He would continue to exercise a firm grip on his subordinates. He was anxious not to let the carpet of Egypt be pulled out from under him as it had been for his ill-fated predecessors.

Due to the strain on his supplies and demands on fuel made by the RAF, Monty initially set the date of the attack for 15 December. On paper it seems like quite some time from when lead troops of the Eighth Army reached the position at the end of November but in reality it gave Monty barely two weeks to attempt to regain some of his balance and get much-needed supplies forward from Tobruk more than 400 miles behind him – a long but simple enough stretch for light and fast-moving assault troops to make in a day driving at full speed but no easy run to haul large and cumbersome loads of fuel supplies and equipment. As Rommel was settling in for what seemed to be the long term, there was no reason for Montgomery to further dislocate his administration in this perilous position if he had a short window of opportunity to ameliorate it somewhat. As at El Alamein, Monty opted to feign inaction in order to lull Rommel into a false sense of security before making the first move.

Meanwhile Monty witnessed the spirits of his men sink all around him. It was what he called 'fear paralysis' in his writings about morale – something he wrote needed to be broken by the decisiveness of a leader. He could not afford to take his time. Otherwise the phantoms of the Desert Fox's past victories would start to play on their imagination – and this unseen killer of courage could impact them in the fight ahead. 'I therefore decided that I must get possession of the Agheila position quickly; morale might decline if we hung about looking at it too long', he wrote.

Rommel's Inner Crisis

Things appeared decidedly different from Rommel's view, but he was no less uneasy than Monty about his overall situation. He indeed felt slightly more secure at El Agheila than in previous places, enough to start digging in and weaving a web of booby traps around his new refuge. But Rommel had taken an extremely dim view of the circumstances in which he found himself. The truth was that the battle against Monty at El Alamein had scarred him not only in terms of the losses to his once-proud *Panzerarmee Afrika* but in his mind as well. The same tough career soldier who for the sake of discipline had forced himself to order his troops to die in vain for a

whole day now insisted on avoiding casualties at all costs. His desire to avoid casualties saw him evacuate every position he occupied at the mere sight of British forces coming. ‘From Tobruk to Mersa el Brega [the El Agheila position] we had lost scarcely a man’, he made a point of noting. That may not have been exactly true. But it was something he had on his conscience.

His choice to flee was not cowardice. Rommel cared deeply about his troops and his bond with them was such that he literally considered himself one of the men. It is very likely he felt guilty after having ordered his men to stand fast at El Alamein and be killed senselessly. He later wrote that his greatest regret with regard to El Alamein was not disobeying Hitler’s command immediately. ‘After all of my experiences I can only identify one mistake that I made, and that is that I did not bypass the “victory or death” order a whole 24 hours earlier’, he wrote bitterly, adding he was certain that if he had, he believed he could have rescued much of his army.

Rommel’s feelings of responsibility towards his men demonstrates his humanity and the sincere attachments he formed for people around him. His attitude differed from that of many other German commanders at the time. Most were cruel about enforcing orders from the Führer. Paulus infamously obeyed Hitler’s orders to keep fighting at Stalingrad despite the gruesome toll on his troops. Field Marshal Ferdinand Schörner brutally killed his own soldiers for deserting. While Hitler’s flattery worked on others, it was not important to Rommel. Indeed Rommel had made a mockery of Hitler’s supposed expertise in the East and the language he had used in his order. When faced with the decision that other German officers had to allow their men to die on Hitler’s orders, Rommel had decided that Hitler was less important to him than his troops.

He had already formed the opinion that his troops either needed to be reinforced or evacuated back to Europe. ‘In no circumstances did I want to play into the hands of British efforts to encircle and annihilate us, but rather to fight delaying actions in interim positions … and never allow myself to be involved in any decisive battle until we were either at reasonable strength in our situation or the majority of the Africa army had been already

transported to Europe and only a reserve was left on African soil to cover the retreat', he wrote with regard to El Alamein.

Yet this was not a firm decision. Rommel was chronically spontaneous and never stuck to a fixed plan. In fact he pondered changing his approach during the retreat. He had considered standing at Tobruk and fighting a siege. But the mere sight of Montgomery approaching had been enough for him to abandon all thought of resistance and simply flee. Now at El Agheila, he was not fleeing anymore – he had decided to hold his ground, but had not made up his mind. He was unsure what to do.

It seemed to others that the once-intrepid Field Marshal had lost all his nerve. Political rivals who already took a dim view of him were now convinced that, underneath it all, the Desert Fox had turned out to be easily frightened in tough circumstances or suffered from extreme mood swings. Rommel became keenly aware of the gossip and resented it. It further embittered him. He saw his army as a victim – and also himself by association. El Alamein indeed changed him.

Rommel had not been naturally inclined to become a soldier. This very typical Swabian was a companionable spirit who thrived in a calm and harmonious existence and had wanted to be an engineer or inventor. After his first bloody fight in 1914, he consistently avoided head-to-head battles in favour of using surprise and deceptive tricks to force surrenders and avoid casualties. Over time Rommel became hardened to battle, but never became hardened to human suffering. He carried deep wounds in his soul from the First World War – the same that contributed to his blackouts at El Alamein. More than 20 years after his first war had ended, Rommel still could not sleep at night. He had seen much bitter fighting and dying, and left the bodies of friends behind on desolate mountainsides. He could not forget what he and his comrades, unappreciated by politicians, had endured. He spent the decades after 1918 reliving the war, plunging himself into veterans' groups, revisiting his old battlefields, trying to make sense of his experiences, turning the hardships into military lessons and thinking about them constantly. Rommel seems to have been desperate to keep his friends' memory alive and make his own wartime experiences meaningful. Other men kept their *Pour le Mérite* medals safely in drawers and did not wear

them all the time. Rommel was rarely ever seen without his; he wore it until it became battered and faded. It is clear that despite the toughness he showed in combat, Rommel remained traumatized by his early war experiences on a level that interfered with his sleep, left him excessively preoccupied with the past, and increased his emotional stress levels during the First World War to the point of causing him to physically suffer, alarming other people around him.

Now the unending nightmare that started in 1914 was repeating itself in even worse form. As in the First World War, Rommel discovered that political leaders did not care about either him or his troops. He was discarded. His men were discarded – brave men he admired and loved. German and Italian soldiers with whom he spent countless hours chattering and photographing with his Leica, whose cheerful dusty faces would live on forever in a trunk of wartime photos later captured by the US Army, had been left dead in the sand at El Alamein because their leaders had not cared about them. He had taken literally thousands of pictures of those men – of the young German soldiers in their caps and shorts and the Italian Bersaglieri troopers with their plumed helmets, working, eating, relaxing together. As he had approached with his camera, they had always looked into the lens with bright faces, happy to see him. Now many of those men were no more. They'd had their heads and limbs blasted off. They'd been crushed to death beneath the tread of tanks and burned alive in their vehicles.

Not to be outdone by Hitler, Mussolini had also cooperated to make it a joint 'victory or death' order, condemning all Italian troops to obliteration as well. Lacking adequate equipment due to the negligence of their own government, many Italians nevertheless had died like tigers – driving in tanks with armour as effective as cardboard, these men had dared to duel against Shermans and perished. The courage they showed can be compared to someone who has only a piece of paper to wield in a swordfight yet tries to fight anyway. That had really got to Rommel. The annihilation of his Ariete troops was the last straw before he called the battle off.

Worst of all, Rommel was painfully aware that he had initially cooperated with this madness. He bore responsibility for the irrevocable

human catastrophe. The blood of his own troops was now on his hands. He'd been placed in the impossible situation of having to choose between obeying his nation's leader and saving his men – and, as he disclosed in writing, he regretted that at first he had chosen wrongly. His direct role in the deaths of his comrades must have caused Rommel psychological anguish worse than anything he had endured before. Never had Rommel been put in such a situation. If the First World War had left Rommel with insomnia, this war had left him infected with the poisonous anger of a soldier who felt deeply betrayed by his country's leadership. Hitler and the High Command had doomed Rommel's troops through pure carelessness and had also stained Rommel's conscience with a terrible guilt.

After El Alamein, Rommel never again showed enthusiasm for fighting. He no longer had any belief that the war could be won. He kept to his job with only a hollow sense of duty – and a lasting resentment against his battlefield rival, Montgomery, that he would manifest in future battles. But his hopes had died. Indeed something else inside him had died. His family, colleagues and people he interacted with noticed a profound change in his personality. Acquaintances theorised that he was depressed about his military defeat. The roots of Rommel's defeat went much deeper. At El Alamein, he had not only been defeated by Montgomery in a military sense but also by Hitler on a spiritual level. Because of Hitler, Rommel had failed his own troops.

To his increased anger, nothing fundamentally changed in the approach of the political leadership even after the horrors he had faced at El Alamein. Rommel expressed resentment that German and Italian authorities seemed to think the situation could be fixed and believed he could somehow stabilize things. They theorized and debated and quibbled, and expected him to still possess energy to solve urgent problems – like normal. Nothing would ever be normal for Rommel again. He believed he and his army had been treated as though their sacrifices and deaths were meaningless, and he harboured a grudge against those he believed had betrayed them – particularly Hitler. He burned with same kind of silent fury that in ancient times had seen a trusted Praetorian guard raise a blade against his emperor. Rommel was now firmly set on a similar path.

The Axis Stands Fast at El Agheila

Things were distinctly chilly between Rommel and his political counterparts in the wake of his flagrantly disobedient retreat. He tried repeatedly to get Kesselring and Cavallero, a go-between to Mussolini, to meet with him in person in the aftermath of El Alamein. They declined. Kesselring, who had taken indignant offence at Rommel's criticisms of Hitler, had left North Africa and refused to come back on the pretext of being busy with other things. Cavallero fobbed Rommel off with various excuses.

As a result, Rommel lacked clear instructions from above during a time when any action he took could have an immediate and lasting impact on the entire course of the war in North Africa. 'We had still received no strategic decision from the supreme German and Italian authorities on the future of the African theatre of war', he wrote. 'They did not look at things realistically – indeed they refused to do so.'

Mussolini, anxious to hang on to whatever could be saved of his Libyan colony, had at first watched Rommel like a worried spectator before sending orders to him in mid-November to stop retreating. The Duce wanted the British to be pinned down in eastern Libya for at least another week. Mussolini had no sense for strategy; he only wanted results. He favoured braggadocio at the expense of reason and was consistently concerned with his public image. That public image naturally suffered with every backward step Rommel's army took.

As Rommel approached El Agheila, Mussolini sent orders for him to hold that position. These orders were endorsed by Hitler a few days later. Rommel had in the past shown himself willing to disobey orders he found were not militarily expedient. He had always believed that being the man on the frontline gave him the best eye for what was happening. Judging this made him the best person to discern logical solutions to problems, he habitually reserved ultimate decision-making authority for himself. He was more willing to disobey orders than ever after what the Führer and the Duce had put his army through at El Alamein. So he did not have to withdraw from the El Agheila position. He was still dismal about his supply situation

and convinced the war was utterly lost. Yet he decided to dig in at El Agheila – not on the basis of his trust in Mussolini or Hitler, but because he believed the place offered him a fighting chance.

Rommel was running extremely low on fuel as his forces pulled up to El Agheila. The Italians fussed and failed to bring him the fuel amounts he wanted, and – to his great frustration – blew up supply dumps across the region to save them from the British, which further provoked his wrath. 'On top of all else, some overzealous people had blown up the ammunition dump at Barce along with the ammunition we were most short of', he wrote. 'The Italian Supply HQ had been overcome by a perfect frenzy of destruction. Ammunition dumps were blown up and water-points destroyed, all of which were urgently needed for the maintenance of the fighting troops. It was only at the last moment that we managed to stop them demolishing the water and electricity works in Benghazi.'

Despite all that he had achieved up until this point – including an amazingly rapid retreat – he was in a dark frame of mind and had a grim view of his own capabilities. 'It was a revolting situation to be standing in the desert incapable of movement', wrote Rommel sourly. However he was not completely immobilized. He sent one of his own army's vehicle columns to Tripoli to retrieve fuel themselves as they waited for Italian supplies to come up.

In a strategic sense, Rommel became convinced his situation was hopeless. This overshadowed his usual tactical brilliance throughout this period. Reflecting on larger themes in the course of the war and the sense of betrayal he felt at the hands of German leadership darkened his view of military situations in front of him. He had also become extremely sensitive about casualties. Seeming to believe that any action he would take would be pointless, he refused to take any risks and repeatedly backed away whenever Montgomery showed his fangs.

Yet at El Agheila, something of Rommel's former strength came back to him. He realized he could take advantage of the natural terrain to put himself in a relatively safe spot and ward the British off as he waited for his situation to improve. After constant flight, stopping and fortifying El Agheila gave Rommel an opportunity to recuperate and reconsider his

options in relative safely. He ordered his troops to work hard at building defences.

Much-Needed Advantages

Rommel described the El Agheila position as one that was ‘very beneficially situated in the terrain. Just a few kilometres from the coast, it butted up against a salt marsh that was about 15km wide. After that came a very good stretch of terrain that was very difficult to cross.’ He knew full well that Monty would have limited options and a hard time landing a punch. ‘An enemy attacking here from the east [in this case Montgomery] would thus be forced to haul off quite far away to the south in order to be able to hit defenders in the flanks or rear’, he wrote.

Even after the ruthlessness and grit Monty had shown at El Alamein and during the pursuit, Rommel still had enough of his former self-confidence about his desert warfare abilities to underestimate Monty’s resolve. He simply thought his troops were better than those of the Eighth Army at wilderness fighting. ‘In open desert, we were, as all previous actions had shown, considerably superior in training and command to the British’, he wrote. He reasoned that Monty, faced with a long voyage into the dune sea, would be reluctant to attempt sneaking up on him and be at least temporarily stymied. He summed up his reason for this thinking: ‘The farther south one has to haul off in North Africa, the more risky the operation becomes.’ He also seems not to have considered that Monty would mount another frontal assault. So as to create an intimidating deterrent, he had his troops not only dig defences and tank traps but create yet another network of numerous mines and booby traps.

Axis reinforcements had begun arriving in North Africa and been brought up to El Agheila. These included a full-strength Italian division called the Young Fascists, in addition to units of the Pistoia and Spezia Divisions; these troops were added to what remained of the Italian XXI Corps, which was also there. A new tank division, Centauro, freshly arrived from Europe was also now at his disposal and deployed behind the position. In addition to these troops, Ramcke’s parachutists and the 164th Light

Division were assembled there as well. Rommel also had his 90th Light Division, the original Afrika Korps and other troops he managed to preserve after the battle at El Alamein. Additionally, Rommel now had large quantities of anti-tank guns at his disposal.

For all his confidence about his desert expertise, he still hated having even one open flank because that meant there still existed a faint possibility, however unlikely, that Montgomery could use it to sneak around and attack him from a different direction. Rommel wanted to decisively assure himself that no such possibility existed. To protect himself from any chance of any enemy attack, he desired more motorized forces – flotillas of Panzers to chase away any British force that remotely looked like it was trying to sneak up on him. And to be extra sure Monty could not get to him, he wanted to have additional motorized forces to deploy on the borders of the salt marsh plus at least two mobile reserve forces. Of course he did not have such a multitude of armoured forces at this point. Yet Rommel refused to feel secure in the absence of more deadly guardian angels.

Why was Rommel so cautious? It seemed uncharacteristic of him, and others noticed it as well. He would claim in his memoirs that he had no hope to accomplish anything because of his lack of supplies and even advantages he had were not enough. At the same time, he would make spiteful comments about Montgomery's supposed need for excessive troop strength, lack of imagination and refusal to engage unless he had superior odds. These statements about Montgomery are untrue, as his bold and ingenious military actions throughout his lifetime including at El Alamein and during the North African pursuit clearly show. Instead these remarks appear to have been a phenomenon of psychological 'mirroring', in which a person accuses another person of exhibiting their own thoughts or behaviour. Rommel was the one who was consistently refusing to do battle with anything less than superior odds. He was the one of the pair who was showing no will to be imaginative or tactically innovative with the troops and weapons he had available. The same Rommel who claimed he stood no chance against Monty due to inferior troop numbers and materiel was the man who had forged his very military reputation by attacking and defeating

numerically and materially superior British forces with very light Panzer forces and low supply strength since 1941.

So was Rommel lying? Had he become a coward? No, but he was reacting emotionally to Montgomery's gains and tried to justify himself later on using illogical arguments. Rommel was focusing on the higher strategic situation of the Second World War and was unwilling to invest in what he believed were pointless stands. At the same time he was reluctant to surrender to the Allies. At El Alamein, Rommel had been totally shocked by Montgomery – deceived, caught off his guard and overwhelmed by ruthless attacks, and at the same time stunned by the orders of Hitler and Mussolini demanding that he and his army obliterate themselves. Faced with the prospect of annihilation, Rommel became thoroughly rattled and extraordinarily indecisive.

Rommel's Potential Attack Plan

Despite his desire for complete protection from Montgomery, Rommel still had enough pluck and resourcefulness to come up with a potential attack plan. El Agheila was his old haunt after all. It was only natural that this familiar desert scenery should rouse in him memories of his old victories and with them a sense of his former confidence. He noticed that Montgomery had slowed to a stop and was sitting across from him apparently not doing anything but trying to sort himself out.

The obviously messy state of British affairs pleased Rommel. 'The British had to organize their supply line', he noted with satisfaction. 'Even with the excellent British supply organization, their whole force could not yet be maintained at Agedabia [area approaching El Agheila]', he observed, adding that a force attacking from the east like Montgomery's would be unable to improvise to maintain a supply line by road alone over such a large distance.

Looking more closely he noted that Montgomery had become supremely isolated. A huge gap had developed in the Eighth Army. Fighting troops had been rushed up to the front and were dangling in a state of dislocation from their main body and line of supply and reinforcement to

their rear. For Rommel, this was a very familiar scenario. He had become an expert at luring British forces too deep into the Saharan sea and then slicing them to ribbons once they were too far away for anyone to save them. Montgomery had apparently made the same mistake. Surmising that the circumstances were very similar to a scenario created by Ritchie in 1941 that Rommel had exploited, he noticed that, 'The British had again followed up with partial forces, leaving their main body in the rear'.

Rommel wanted to attack. 'In January 1942, we had succeeded … in falling upon and smashing the British vanguard with locally superior forces before effective help could reach them', he wrote. He envisioned several different possibilities for stealth attacks from his Panzers, and discussed his ideas in detail with his staff and the leader of the Italian XXI Corps, General Enea Navarrini, who had been at his side since his early days in North Africa.

The plan involved bypassing Monty's lead troops and making a stab at his supply line. Even if Monty decided to try to outflank him by going south, Rommel could ignore the move and cut across to hit him in his exposed weak spot and land a severe blow. Of course Rommel was unaware of Montgomery's plans and had not taken into account that Monty had decided on weaving a more complex tapestry of movement with three columns, which would allow him great flexibility to respond to Rommel's manoeuvres. But Rommel was used to fighting British generals who were linear thinkers and developed plans from a limited perspective, and from Rommel's viewpoint right now, this seemed like a viable option. Indeed, it was exactly the type of plan Montgomery was worried that Rommel would try, and the reason why Monty was getting so nervous about his own situation. Navarrini was only concerned about the potential impact it would have on his troops of Italian infantry. Rommel hesitated to firm up the details.

In his later writings, Rommel would claim he had never hoped to make a successful attack on Monty at El Agheila. However, that assertion contradicts other statements he recorded about this time period. As is well-known, Rommel liked to improvise and did not bind himself to definite plans of action well in advance. The facts suggest he dug in at El Agheila

and developed a plan to attack Monty because he desired to put it into action. However, Rommel continued to reel from his own plummeting morale. Feeling insecure, he wanted to wait and see whether he would get more supplies before he took action.

'The question of whether we would be able to get motorized units and Panzers and a secure supply of fuel and ammunition for them – before the enemy started an attack – would decide the battle of Mersa el Brega [El Agheila]', he wrote.

The Duellists Flinch

Facing each other across the Libyan desert, both generals hesitated. Neither wanted to take the other on at that place or time. They both felt handicapped and unsure of themselves for different reasons. Both were overestimating one another and had exaggerated views about the other's strength. They had both given each other a vicious thrashing at El Alamein – their first real grappling match. Monty had won that round. But it wasn't over. Rommel had frantically used all of his powers to escape the coup de grace and now seemed to be rising from the floor of his defeat with renewed strength.

Of the two of them, Monty was the most temperamentally disposed to fight. But he had been too impetuous in trying to smash Rommel after initially knocking him down. Now Monty faced his renewed enemy while himself standing on the edge of a proverbial cliff. Monty had lost his balance and was trying to regain it. He was very conscious of the many and diverse spectators of their duel, not least of all his own men and national government, and feared what could happen if Rommel managed to give him a big shove.

It was true Rommel now stood in a stronger position and had more material in hand to fight with. However, he had not yet completely recovered from the battering he had sustained. Above all he was now suffering from a psychological wound caused by his leadership's treatment of him that affected his ability to think clearly. He was uncharacteristically indecisive. He wanted to attack Monty. But he was fearful. If he did attack, he wanted to ensure he did so with the capacity to make a very painful blow

and not be laid low a second time. Now keenly sensitive to casualties among his troops, he did not want to risk another heavy bloodletting. A stalemate ensued as the two fighters stared each other down. A tense silence fell across the arid no-man's land between both armies.

There is every indication from Monty's actions that he was gravely concerned about a clash at El Agheila. Monty ordered his troops to halt. Rommel was digging in and not going anywhere for the time being, which did not change despite his shifting some of his Italian forces farther back into Libya in early December. Monty wanted to take advantage of this lull to build up strength. In another sign that Montgomery was gearing up for a big fight and wanted to ensure things ran smoothly, he reorganized and rotated members of his staff and corps commanders. He noted that his chief of staff De Guingand 'collapsed' during the battle's preparation phase and was sent away on leave. Others were replaced and shifted to ensure maximum efficiency.

Rommel, too, welcomed the time for respite he had on his hands. He noticed that Monty showed no signs of movement. 'It soon became clear that we were in for another mutual build-up of strength at the Mersa el-Brega position', he observed. Like his enemy, Rommel also wanted to bring supplies forward before making any next moves.

His troops dug in furiously under the auspices of Field Marshal Ettore Bastico who had been installed as his ostensible supervisor shortly before the Battle of El Alamein and, following the retreat, had recently had his authority over Rommel reasserted by both Hitler and the Duce. In contrast to many other Italian generals in North Africa, the reserved, aquiline Bastico showed a studious interest in military matters and took his job seriously. He was definitely out to assert Italian military independence. He and Rommel sometimes wrestled against each other for control of the army. However, they proved capable of working through their difficulties and Rommel expressed a high personal opinion of him. At this time, Bastico was seeking to preserve Italian interests and had only two goals: to hold whatever territory he could and obey the Duce. Bastico lacked a powerful personality and was not beloved by the troops. Thus Rommel, despite Hitler

and Mussolini's attempts to contain his authority, continued to wield ultimate control over the whole army.

Neither Montgomery nor Rommel were sure what to expect from one another. Each felt as though he would have to fight with one hand tied behind his back. As an uncanny lull settled over their next battlefield, both commanders, despite their extremely different personalities, became jittery and had the same reaction: they briefly left the arena.

Rommel was going to Europe. He knew it was a risky business politically. Ever since his disobedience at El Alamein, the respective tyrants in Germany and Italy had tried to put him on a tighter leash. Technically he was under Bastico's command now and it had been made clear to him that he was not to attempt to initiate direct communication with higher powers in Rome or Berlin anymore. But Rommel was still mentally smarting from the 'victory or death' orders he had broken at Alamein. He was angry, confused and disillusioned. He was not satisfied with sitting out in the desert and being forced into another death match with Montgomery. Instead he wanted to confront his leadership. He had questions for Hitler and Mussolini. Despite the fact that he knew his unauthorized journey would upset both dictators, he wanted to demand answers from them in person.

Montgomery headed back to Cairo for a brief period of leave, during which time he stayed in the British embassy and discussed his plans for El Agheila with Alexander. This indicated he wanted to keep his superiors briefed thoroughly about a possible crisis situation. He also said he wanted to refresh himself after living in the desert non-stop for four months. Although he largely downplayed the trip as a lark to retrieve fresh clothes and get 'cleaned up', that is an understatement. Monty's decision to head to Cairo is very telling. He saw cleanliness as a core pillar to good morale. He was not only fastidiously clean by nature, but saw it as a way to keep a clear mind and self-confidence. The fact that he briefly withdrew from the front to rest and wash up during his military build-up is a strong indication he wanted to boost his own morale, refresh his mind and body and thus think more clearly. He was trying to steel himself for the action ahead.

CHAPTER 9

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

‘There sat a proud and noble king, in realms and triumphs was none richer;
He sat upon a darkened throne, so pale and so sinister,
Because what he planned was horror, and what he saw was rage,
The very words he spoke were torture; he wrote in blood on every page.’

Ludwig Uhland, *Des Sängers Fluch*

The entire time that Monty and Rommel had been battling against one another in the marvellous desolation of the Sahara, other kinds of battles were taking place on a much higher and more esoteric level within the twin realms of international politics and the media. Wars are after all driven by politics, and politicians depend largely on public opinion for their success, which is influenced by the media. Therefore the bloody tank battles in North Africa cannot be regarded separately from the politicians who had fuelled the whole thing and had vested interests in its outcome, nor the media benefits – and catastrophes – that this theatre of the war incurred for them.

The great tangle of nations across the North African sands had begun, as has already been shown, as a result of Mussolini's envy of his erstwhile brother-in-tyranny Hitler, and his efforts to prove his martial prowess. Hitler had agreed to come to the rescue after Mussolini's Egyptian escapades backfired. This was not an act of fraternal Axis affection but because Hitler now felt humiliated at being associated with Italy and felt he had to stop the Italians from causing his Nazi regime further international embarrassment. Much had happened since Rommel's auspicious start to his 'aid for Italy' mission in 1941. Following a series of shameful beatings, the British had bounded back and reasserted their global prestige. Axis military fortunes in North Africa had taken a decisive turn for the worse in the winter of 1942. The ripple effects this had on politicians and the media naturally influenced the decisions that Montgomery and Rommel would make on the battlefield.

The Fox and The Duce

Mussolini had a complex relationship with Rommel. Both the Italian dictator and his son-in-law Ciano – who apart from being his Foreign Minister also functioned as his personal assistant, secretary, confidant and all-around accomplice – blew hot and cold about Rommel's successes in North Africa. Both were highly defensive of Italian honour and thus got into a few diplomatic spats to reassert their authority over Rommel. Otherwise, however, they found him reliable. Ciano, who detested Germans and was prepared to hate and mistrust Rommel, ended up finding his judgments dependable. Remarkably Ciano's colourful diary contains no vitriolic statements about Rommel personally. Mussolini was alternately pleased by Rommel's achievements and riled up by the fact that a German had taken over what was supposed to be a fascist Italian conquest of Egypt. According to Ciano, Rommel's victories would alternately result in joy for Mussolini or 'cause the Duce much pain'.

Mussolini remained invidiously competitive with his German allies. On a personal level he rather liked Rommel, and the feeling was mutual. Rommel found Mussolini quite irritating but nevertheless became fond of the flamboyant and cantankerous Duce. In Mussolini he saw not only a

fellow dreamer but a doer who seemed genuinely concerned with Italy's welfare; Rommel had admired the scenic farming communities of Italian settlers in Libya. 'I had always greatly appreciated the Duce. He was probably a great performer, like most Italians. However, although inclined to high aims intellectually, he was much too dependent on his emotions in order to be able to realize his ambitious plans. Otherwise there was however no doubt that the Italian people had much to thank him for', Rommel wrote. He also appreciated Mussolini's respect for his abilities, which was often lacking among his fellow Germans: 'He always thanked me for our efforts in the African campaign and assured me of his unlimited trust.'

Yet Mussolini was a jealous man. He saw in Rommel's successes a bittersweet echo of the fantasies he once had of Italy's triumphs. Mussolini had desired success in North Africa, but the hero of this dramatic performance was originally supposed to have been an Italian. That had been the whole point of Mussolini's attacking the British in Egypt in the first place. Since Hitler and Goebbels couldn't resist a chance to boast of German victories, North Africa inevitably transformed into a prime venue for positive Third Reich military publicity with every success of Rommel. This rubbed salt in the wound for the already slighted Mussolini. Opening the door of opportunity even just a crack to Hitler had led the Germans careening into view and stealing the whole show. Mussolini stewed. Everything had gone quite backwards indeed from what he had originally intended. He blamed everything on his reluctant dragon, Graziani, whose failure to conquer Egypt he never forgot and was prone to rant about even years later. Following Rommel's triumphs in the summer of 1942, the Duce continued to fume about Graziani who he said 'had always been seventy feet underground in a Roman tomb at Cyrene while Rommel knows how to lead his troops with the personal example of the general who lives in his tank'.

Due to this sense of envy, a minor international competition resulted in the wake of Hitler's promotion of Rommel to the rank of Field Marshal on 22 June 1942. Alarmed and affronted, Mussolini decided to respond by promoting Generals Ettore Bastico and Ugo Cavallero to the same rank. This was supposed to assert the pride of Italy and ensure no German

commander could outrank the Italian ones in the field. It was a strange domino phenomenon in which one man's promotion resulted in a career boon for two others simply for the sake of a fourth man's abstract national pride. Bastico had not done anything so noteworthy so as to merit the rank of Field Marshal, nor especially had Cavallero – a fact which the cynical Ciano couldn't fail to notice. Reacting strongly to the promotions, which were to be dished out with conspicuous and somewhat embarrassing speed after Rommel's, Ciano sarcastically protested to his father-in-law: 'Bastico's promotion will make people laugh; Cavallero's will make them indignant.'

Inevitable squabbles arose in the North African theatre. German officers including Rommel were often frustrated about Italian lack of efficiency while the Italians were easily offended and would sometimes be obstinate just to prove a point. Rommel himself was involved in several melodramatic arguments with Italian generals which exasperated him.

Regardless of various difficulties, the Italians demonstrated that cultural difficulties could be overcome. Rommel often found them more empathetic and cooperative than his own people, writing that in the later stages of the North African campaign Italy's military leaders were more willing to listen to him than Hitler's High Command. Although their respective governments kept the units of Rommel's army separated according to nationality, Rommel did his best to integrate German and Italian troops and encourage positive interactions to forge a shared sense of community. This was not always effective but in some cases it worked well. He saved photos of himself decorating his Italian troops as mementos. While Rommel was no diplomat and cannot be said to have worked smoothly with Italian officers, he showed open-mindedness and goodwill towards Italians, particularly the rank and file troops. Despite their tendency towards rivalry, the Italians by and large showed greater willingness to behave in a collaborative way with the Germans than the other way around.

The Alliance Falters

Many other high-ranking German military officials treated the Italians with open contempt, and opportunities for goodwill were lost. This became worse over time as Italy's military prowess decreased to practically subzero levels on the stage of global perception. The North African campaign contributed significantly to the deterioration of the Axis alliance. An atmosphere of resentment boiled among Italian officials in Rome at the increasingly condescending behaviour of Hitler's emissaries. Rather than thinly concealing their contempt as in the past, many German officials became more overtly disrespectful and patronizing, including during meetings between Ciano, Mussolini's officials and staff at Hitler's headquarters. They treated the Italians as if the situation in North Africa was a purely Italian problem and requests for cooperation or advice as burdensome.

Goebbels' Nazi publicity machine also successfully drowned Italy out of the global view of the Axis alliance. Nazi propaganda flooded the airwaves as did its films and images methodically scattered all over the world. Germans were portrayed as winning everywhere while Italians fighting alongside them on various fronts were practically non-existent. The Allied press regularly reported about Italy – losing. It appeared to most observers that Italy was a joke. Whatever Italy's military did well during the war was never heard of, and Mussolini's endless strategic blundering reflected poorly on his country. The general Italian population was not immune to the news of their nation's military defeats and setbacks, especially magnified by Nazi propaganda that contrasted their country's lack of successes compared to their supposed German ally.

From an Italian point of view, Montgomery's victory at Alam Halfa in September 1942 was a terrible shattering point. Indeed Mussolini and his close associates had more of a negative reaction to it than at what transpired during the more famous battle at El Alamein later in October. Interestingly Italian leadership appeared to regard El Alamein as a series of battles within a larger British offensive rather than as a single decisive fight. Alam Halfa cast a longer shadow for them. While Hitler's High Command refused to recognize the remotest possibility of defeat until El Alamein, Mussolini and Ciano detected the writing on the wall earlier.

For all his petulance, the Duce would have been thrilled if his troops had managed to seize Egypt and march into Cairo – even if under Rommel's command. North Africa was Italy's most promising arena of combat during the war. The unctuous Cavallero had assured the Duce that Rommel was sure to capture the Suez Canal in September 1942. When Rommel failed to do so and remained frozen in the desert as a result of the Battle of Alam Halfa, Mussolini fell into a 'black mood', did not speak about nor offer opinions regarding North Africa for three days, and began experiencing such severe stomach pains that he demanded to see a radiologist and could barely sit through a meeting, according to Ciano. An atmosphere of gloom gripped Italy's leadership as Rommel stayed fixed in the desert as their supply ships were continuously sunk by the British.

At El Alamein, Mussolini opted to echo Hitler's orders for annihilation rather than admit defeat or mandate the withdrawal of Italian troops. 'Two days ago Rommel supposedly wanted to begin his withdrawal [at El Alamein], but Hitler nailed him to the spot with the order to "show the troops the way of victory or death". Mussolini did the same with our forces', wrote Ciano. He added that although Cavallero encouraged them to remain optimistic about possible success, 'I believe little in any of the virtues of this faker [Cavallero], and especially his type of faith convinces me least of all.'

Unlike the Germans, who were outraged about Rommel's retreat, the Italians were not initially sure what to make of Rommel's flight after El Alamein. At first they appear to have considered his withdrawal a potentially positive strategic move. As events in North Africa continued to spiral out of control in British favour over the next two months, Italian officials and members of the general public began falling into a deep depression. 'I see a few people', wrote Ciano, 'and gather the impression that the events … have been a sad blow for the country, which, for the first time, is asking many questions without finding answers.'

Many Italians felt increasingly they were being trapped in a losing war and dragged along helter-skelter in a *danse macabre* led by the Nazis, who had no interest in their wellbeing. The population of Italy felt exploited and abused. The crowds of Rome who once cheered ecstatically for Mussolini

and welcomed Hitler as a friend now began to murmur in anger. The Duce had wished to recreate the Roman Empire, but this aspiring fascist emperor would soon learn why even the proudest Caesars feared the Roman mob.

Seeds of Rebellion

As the public mood soured, the Duce came under increasing criticism. There were whisperings among government officials, intrigues at the Vatican, surreptitious meddling by Italy's King Victor Emmanuel III, rumours of all kinds and a general sense among members of Mussolini's fascist government that all was definitely not well. One of Mussolini's former hardcore Blackshirts, Giuseppe Bottai, formerly a strong admirer of the Nazi regime for its racial policies, turned against the Duce over the misfortunes of the war. After the Battle of Alam Halfa in late September 1942, Bottai complained about the war during a private meeting with Ciano and criticized the Duce with astonishing candour, disparaging Mussolini as 'a self-taught man who had a bad teacher, and who was a worse student'. Bottai later supported Mussolini's arrest.

Even the Germans started to sense a change in the air. *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler, leader of Hitler's Gestapo and security forces to whom Ciano referred as a 'spider', started sniffing around, appearing in Rome at odd times and asking some apparently harmless but unusual questions. It didn't take a secret police chief to know that Italy was getting fed up with the way the war was going for them. Rommel himself had noticed it early on. 'Many Italians felt that the Axis alliance was a sham', he wrote, adding that it had become clear to him by then that most Italians wanted out of the war.

Rommel believed corruption and backbiting in Italy's military and government were working against Mussolini. 'Now the Duce was seeing his dreams crumbling', he wrote of the period of Axis decline in North Africa in the aftermath of El Alamein. 'These were bitter hours for him, and he was certainly in no condition to bear the consequences. Maybe at the end I should have behaved differently towards him, but I was so angry about the endless glossing over of everything that I really could just not do it.'

Mussolini did not care how distressed citizens of his country were becoming. Although aware of resentment against him, he arrogantly believed he could ride out the storm. Nor did he recognize that the weakness within his state presented the Allies with a prime opportunity. On 30 November 1942, Churchill made a rousing speech urging the people of Italy to rise up and overthrow Mussolini. Was the Duce dismayed? On the contrary, he was buoyed by the public attention he received. Flattered, he told his son-in-law proudly: 'Churchill's address honours me because it proves that I am the real antagonist of Great Britain.'

Italy was indeed destined to turn against the Germans and sign a treaty with the Allies in the near future. Things had started to head in this direction thanks to Montgomery's victories over Rommel in North Africa.

Rommel as a Propaganda Sacrifice

The shadowy figures standing at the highest echelon of the Third Reich had keenly watched – and exploited – Rommel's successes in North Africa since he began attacking the British in early 1941. Although Rommel, perceiving that offence was the best defence, had stepped out of the bounds of his original orders, his accomplishments delighted Hitler and especially Goebbels. Consequently Rommel's conquest across North Africa received enthusiastic political and military support.

Goebbels found Rommel an ideal propaganda figure. The German military had been dominated for ages by generations of crusty and perpetually scowling Prussian aristocrats. They were out of fashion and had distinctly worn out their welcome after bearing responsibility for the bloody bungling during the First World War that ended in Germany's defeat. The leaders of the Nazi Party were ruthlessly ambitious men who had stood no chance of success in Imperial Germany but perceived opportunities in the chaos of its First World War downfall and the shaky Weimar Republic. They had clawed their way to power with a desire to overthrow old norms and craft a new society that reflected their views. Thus the Nazi Party wanted self-made men as the faces of their movement – men with ordinary backgrounds and aggressive personalities, the younger the better. Most

generals the Nazi regime had to work with as of early 1941 didn't fit the bill. Some were considered capable, but hardly had sparkling personalities and, with their stuffy mannerisms and eternal grimaces, made for gruesome newsreel material.

Then Rommel appeared. Apart from having an average family background that fit in with National Socialist ideals, he was friendly, photogenic, relatively young, and above all successful on the battlefield. Rommel was just the right type of military commander to 'sell' not only to Germans but to the enemy as a figurehead of a modern military leader the Third Reich had to offer.

Both Hitler and Goebbels realized that Rommel was useful to them regardless of how events played out. In November 1941, Hitler ordered Goebbels not to overplay his propaganda cards about Rommel's expected victories just in case any unexpected setbacks occurred, but gave Goebbels free rein to make as much political use of Rommel as possible in the media. Goebbels then decided that 'when the battle in North Africa is decided, Rommel must be elevated to a type of people's hero', according to his diary on 22 November 1941. 'The army really needs it. The Luftwaffe have their stars, and also the navy. Only the army is so reserved about their leading men and too tight-lipped. We can't hope to popularize the infantry if we don't have an outstanding example of the infantry made visible and introduced in the [German] people's consciousness'. He got army leaders to promise not to stand in the way of efforts. 'So, next we want to start with Rommel, even though he's already had his 50th birthday', added Goebbels somewhat gingerly with regard to the Desert Fox's age. Although Rommel couldn't compare to the younger baby-faced killers moulded in the Hitler Youth and forged by the SS, Goebbels recognized that he was still marketable.

Rommel himself saw that propaganda was useful in maintaining troop morale and intimidating the enemy, and wrote that he viewed it as a viable tactic in war. Therefore he did not shy away from propaganda cameras or journalists – although he objected to Goebbels publishing a fake biography. This far-fetched but far-reaching tale claimed Rommel had been a Nazi stormtrooper and an early Hitler devotee whose father – for the sake of

socialist embellishment – had been a bricklayer. That was quite a far cry from Rommel's scenic upbringing in Heidenheim. Rommel was likely more than a little insulted that his respectable schoolteacher father, Erwin Sr., had been ingloriously transformed into a construction worker. He reacted with indignation and allegedly scribbled, 'Nonsense!' in the margins of a German publication in which he discovered the article. He promptly sent complaints to the Propaganda Ministry. Of course these falsehoods had been artfully orchestrated and nothing was done to correct them. The fake biography fell into Allied hands and did lasting damage to create perceptions of Rommel as a Nazi. Consequently in Allied propaganda, Rommel was depicted – not, as some people now believe, as a generous or humane opponent – but as a cruel and uneducated Brownshirt thug. Some among the Allies even believed that Rommel was a member of the SS. Confusion over Rommel's basic biographical details and political affiliations lasted even throughout the post-war era.

A Vanishing Star

After Rommel's defeat and disobedience to Hitler at El Alamein, Hitler and Goebbels decided to hide their chosen 'people's hero'. Rommel, who had once featured regularly in the popular weekly propaganda newsreels called *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*, vanished from Nazi media coverage entirely. As Rommel retreated frantically across the Sahara on 10 November 1942, Goebbels described 'the situation at the Egyptian border' as 'no longer very interesting'. A media blackout began in Germany that lasted for quite some time.

Goebbels took measures to control the narrative of defeat. On 17 November, Goebbels gave a speech at a Nazi Party rally in Wuppertal in which he made a point of addressing the situation in North Africa and reassuring his audience with the words, 'We have absolutely nothing to hide'. With some remarkable sophistry and outright lies, he wove a rhetorical web in which he ridiculously cast the Allies as bullies for attacking weakened areas on German frontlines, claimed it was totally natural to move back and forth in a desert and proclaimed that even if

something like an unlikely defeat did happen, it wouldn't matter because the war was an 'eternal' one the German people would win one way or another. For all of Goebbels' efforts at elaboration, these poor excuses were all that was to be expected from a dishonest regime trying to avoid embarrassment for losing a campaign.

Propaganda became the deadly noose that eventually killed Rommel. To Hitler and Goebbels, he was not a person, but a symbol to be used. While Rommel thought that lending himself to propaganda efforts was his way of intimidating his battlefield enemies, he failed to realize he was instead being wielded as a tool for larger goals in the hands of more powerful people. When Rommel showed unwillingness to be exploited as part of this Faustian pact, Nazi leaders saw him as an inoperable but dangerous tool that ultimately either needed to be hidden or gotten rid of.

Hitler's Dangerous Fantasies

By January 1942, Hitler was so pleased with Rommel's military talents that he decided to wait for an opportune moment to pluck him from the Sahara and turn him loose on the Russians on the Eastern Front. Although Hitler 'under no circumstance was willing to give up Africa', according to Goebbels in 1941, he was fatally preoccupied with ideology rather than strategy. This saw Hitler focus myopically on his quest to slay supposedly subhuman enemies in the Soviet Union rather than invest greater energy Rommel's plan to gain the Suez Canal and access to Middle Eastern oil.

As a leader, Hitler flattered his followers, used them ruthlessly and habitually abandoned them. He was good at appearing to be invested in other people but ultimately did not care about them. When Rommel started to expect help or understanding from Hitler as more problems arose in North Africa, Hitler failed to deliver and started to avoid him, not wanting to be bothered. He had his own goals to achieve in the East. Although he fully endorsed Rommel's actions and would have rejoiced to see him take Egypt, there was no question a war of annihilation against the Soviet Union was what attracted Hitler's excitement and fulltime interest.

Furthermore, like Mussolini, Hitler, too, had a sense of rivalry and wanted to keep the Duce in check. Since the North African campaign still had decidedly Italian fingerprints on it, there were limitations to how far Hitler was willing to go to make Mussolini look good. In Hitler's opinion, Rommel needed to manage with the resources he was given and the Italians needed to pull through on their own to make up for the rest. Hitler consistently became more aloof and even hostile to Rommel as Rommel made complaints and tried to express concern about the course of the war.

Hitler was nothing less than outraged about Rommel disobeying his 'victory or death' order. By refusing to die, Rommel had placed Hitler in the embarrassing situation of losing a campaign. Worse, Rommel had dared to flout his authority as the Führer. Yet despite provoking his ire, Hitler did not punish Rommel outright because he was such a useful propaganda tool. He also believed the resourceful Rommel might come in handy someday due to the fresh military ideas he always seemed to have up his sleeve. Although Rommel irritated Hitler and overstepped what the dictator viewed as his boundaries, Hitler perceived an advantage in keeping Rommel around – even if that meant eventually in isolation and on a shelf.

The egotistical Hitler was primarily concerned with public perceptions of him rather than the hard reality of battles. From this point onwards, Hitler would turn North Africa into a venue for an elaborate but doomed drama, one in which he would try to avoid the appearance of a German loss and gradually withdraw Rommel, his propaganda chess piece, with subtle certainty to allow for his future use.

Clipping Rommel's Wings

In the aftermath of El Alamein, Hitler made a point of grandly ignoring Rommel. To save face, Hitler endorsed Rommel's retreat after it had already begun. Communication attempts from Rommel afterwards were spurned. As a passive aggressive move to express his displeasure with Rommel, Hitler transmitted an order to him in November 1942 placing him under the firm command of Italian Marshal Ettore Bastico. Hitler had frequently allowed Rommel to approach him directly regarding matters in

North Africa. During the Battle of El Alamein, Rommel had been placed under the direct authority of Hitler and Mussolini not only so that each leader could influence decisions during the battle but also to provide the fretful Rommel with the reassurance that he was dealing with the 'top man' in each country.

After Rommel had the effrontery to defy both Führer and Duce at the same time, Hitler withdrew his graces and commanded that Bastico be placed in charge of the impudent Desert Fox. This appeased the perpetually insulted Italians but above all else effectively dispensed with Rommel, cutting him off from German military authorities. Rommel was now a servant of Italy, with everything that such a position implied. He became officially unworthy of the attention of authorities in Berlin. If he had a problem, he could take it up with Bastico, who served under Mussolini.

After Hitler overcame his initial storm of outrage, he ended up trying to take direct control of the North African campaign as the retreat got further underway and sent clear orders for Rommel to follow. This was one way of getting back at Rommel for his insolence and show him who was the boss. Never to be surpassed in a show of bossing, the Duce also sent his own orders, and both dictators' commands were frequently at odds. Rommel was already seething against Hitler and other German officials. Being put out to pasture under Bastico and then confronted with more ludicrous commands from Hitler and Mussolini at once made him even more furious than he already was.

Italy's leadership had a colony to lose, a Duce to appease and thus slightly more use for Rommel in North Africa. Rommel's peculiar stance between two supposedly allied but conflicting totalitarian states would see him performing a perilous balancing act as the increasingly bitter Axis coalition foundered on the rocks of the war and began sinking into oblivion. In the lead-up to the Battle of El Agheila in December 1942, Rommel was alternately abandoned and oppressed by his political masters since he had decided to live with his troops in shame rather than die for two tyrants' glory.

Confronting The Ringmasters

Relations between Germany and Italy were rapidly plunging to a Plutonian level as Rommel and Montgomery prepared for their next fight at El Agheila in December 1942. ‘The Libyan retreat is assuming more and more the character of a rout’, noted Ciano. The Italian government at first vacillated on the sidelines with indecision. Nobody in Rome was exactly sure what Rommel was planning or where exactly – or if – he intended to make a stand. Eventually Mussolini decided things were going too far. As Rommel sped like lightning back across Libya, Italy’s colony there faced an existential threat. Houses of Italian settlers were plundered by Arabs and atrocities committed against colonists by some local tribes as Rommel evacuated. Mussolini wanted him to screech to a halt before things totally fell to pieces. Rommel, having been placed under the command of Bastico, was ordered by the Duce to put the brakes on around El Agheila. In the wake of Mussolini’s command, Hitler followed up with an order of his own parroting the same instructions. So much for reporting to Bastico.

This was only the beginning of a contest between two delusional dictators trying to assert their authority over Rommel, spare themselves the humiliation of defeat and continue competing with each other. Despite being perfectly capable of disobeying them, Rommel stuck to his orders this time as he perceived El Agheila offered him promising defences. However he remained jumpy at the prospect of fighting Montgomery again. He wanted clear political direction.

Rommel had been unable to get either German or Italian officials to meet with him following his remarkable feat of defiance by disobeying both Führer and Duce in one fell swoop at El Alamein. Kesselring, who had attempted in vain to defend Hitler, was ignoring Rommel totally and Cavallero was making a grand point of snubbing him. Finally on 24 November the three of them – Cavallero, Kesselring and Rommel – met in person in Libya at the Arco de Fileni, known as the Marble Arch.

Built by the Italian fascist government and unveiled in 1937, the Arco de Fileni was a grisly phantasm in the wilderness. This huge, ornate white marble archway spanned the lonely main highway called the Via Balbia and contained a gruesome monument at its pinnacle: the bronze figures of the two legendary brothers (known as the Philaeni) from ancient Carthage in

the act of being buried alive. According to the ancient Roman author Sallust, the pair chose such a death rather than allow foreigners to encroach on their national border. The bronze male figures at the top of the arch, far from being shown in a state of peaceful repose, were cast squirming in a dark coffin-like space with their arms and legs seeming to writhe from the monument directly above the roadway. Rommel's meeting there with Cavallero and Kesselring contained a hint of eerie irony. The German and Italian units of Rommel's army, fighting as brothers-in-arms, were then being proverbially buried alive by their leaders in the sands of North Africa rather than permitted to give ground.

The results of the meeting were predictably messy. What Rommel had desired was either permission to withdraw or more land forces to fight Montgomery. Both of these were denied to him. The politically savvy Kesselring was unwilling to invest either in El Agheila or in a possible retreat suggested by Rommel to Gabes in Tunisia. In a vote of no confidence, Kesselring gave orders for Rommel to split up his troops at El Agheila to send more men rearward to protect Tripoli. Simultaneously, Kesselring vowed air support for Rommel if he decided to stand and fight at El Agheila. These instructions were confused to say the least. The Italians still had their own spices of disarray to add to the military mix-up. They knew for starters there should be no withdrawal. Italy did not want to give up any more ground to maintain some level of international dignity and protect its crumbling colonial possessions, which Kesselring had little interest in helping them accomplish. The Italians ordered Rommel to obey only Marshal Bastico, who was instructed to hold El Agheila at all costs. Bastico warned Rommel that he had been given instructions to stop Rommel from making attempts to retreat. That wasn't the end of the matter either. Mussolini was not satisfied with holding the line. The Duce wanted to see an attack. He passed on orders for Rommel to sally forth from El Agheila and hit Montgomery on the nose, confident the Luftwaffe would take care of any scrumming that Rommel's bolstered army could not do.

Politics had taken precedence over strategy and the result was a real military nightmare. No field commander can expect to succeed in battle if compelled to obey so many meddlers with contradictory instructions. The

Italians and Germans had totally different attitudes about the situation in North Africa which were becoming more excruciatingly obvious than ever. One thing was clear: Rommel had lost prestige after El Alamein and was considered incompetent by his leaders and peers, or at the very least they had decided to treat him that way. Hence the respective emissaries of Hitler and Mussolini were now all jumping into the fray to box Rommel in and tell him what to do – although they hardly knew what they were doing themselves. The Desert Fox found himself faced with another epic struggle, but not against his enemy on the battlefield – he would now have to fight for something he usually did most poorly, which was to achieve his goals from an administrative standpoint. Axis forces facing Montgomery now ran the risk of being defeated simply as a result of German-Italian bureaucratic squabbling.

In an action that would further provoke widespread outrage against him from on high, Rommel decided to leave North Africa without anybody's permission to land on Hitler's doorstep. Rommel believed the present confusion was a Tower of Babel-type phenomenon resulting from failed communications. He hoped he could get to the heart of the matter by cutting through all the red tape being wrapped around him and speaking with Hitler directly.

The Führer's Rage

Rommel's decision to leave the front line and charge directly into Hitler's face was the worst mistake he could have made from a political viewpoint. It is another factual boulder in the mountain of evidence proving Rommel was not the politically ambitious opportunist that critical historians have made him out to be. His trip to Germany was interpreted by Hitler and his staff as calling the Führer on the carpet.

Arriving on 28 November, Rommel described being struck by the frosty manner in which he was received at the Führer's HQ. It is slightly surprising that Rommel would have expected anything different following his disobedience of Hitler's maniacal 'victory or death' order at El Alamein. Perhaps Rommel, despite the deep anger he felt towards Hitler for having

placed him in such a terrible situation, naively still expected some level of understanding between himself and his boss could be reached. Perhaps he hoped there was still a touch of human empathy within Hitler that would respond to his worries about the troops and grant his wish for extra military resources to defend the men from Montgomery or, alternately, withdraw them. Rommel's concern for his troops was the issue that lay at the heart of his desire to seek a meeting with Hitler. Shaken to his core after El Alamein, Rommel did not want to be placed in another situation in which he would be forced to order the men to be killed needlessly again. He was there to appeal on their behalf. He approached Hitler and began an effort to speak to this effect.

He managed to get the grim-faced Hitler to acknowledge the disadvantages his army faced. Hitler attempted to toss some encouragement his way by telling him he had done a good job of fighting and retreating. After all, the Führer only wanted to discuss things in terms of positivity – he did not want to hear about difficulties or the potential of failure, and was prepared to be mildly cordial to Rommel just to avoid the shame of having to discuss problems. However, Rommel, for all his desert guile, was politically artless. The Desert Fox stepped on a rhetorical landmine by airing his concerns about the troops to Hitler. He inquired about Germany's overall strategic goals for North Africa and expressed his worry that the troops would not be able to hold out in the long term, even suggesting North Africa might have to be abandoned to prevent the army from being destroyed. His words had an effect of 'a spark in a barrel of gunpowder', he wrote.

For the first time, Rommel witnessed one of the demoniacal outbursts of fury that Hitler was prone to vent upon the heads of military advisors and personnel close to him – a face of his raw, unhinged power he rarely showed to outsiders. 'The Führer became indescribably furious and directed a deluge of accusations against us that were totally unfounded', according to Rommel. Rommel was wrong to assume that Hitler could be persuaded to preserve soldiers' lives. Battering home that holding North Africa was a political mandate, Hitler breathed fire on Rommel, accusing him of

defeatism and accusing his troops of casting away their weapons in retreat in what Rommel described as ‘passionate outbursts’.

Did Rommel cower or suffer the accusations in silence? No. He attempted to argue with the formidable Führer. Hitler took the opportunity to get even with Rommel for his disobedience at El Alamein and avenge his wounded pride for the flouted ‘victory or death’ order. ‘The Führer said that he had saved the Russian front in the winter of 1941-42 with his decision to hold the line and that there, also, he had enforced his commands ruthlessly’, wrote Rommel. A flock of Hitler’s staff gathered around to back up the dictator as Rommel, the lone dissident dwarfed in the rising shadow of a powerful monster, was forced to back down.

He was dismissed from Hitler’s presence with statements to the effect that everyone of course wanted to send him supplies. For now he was to be sent to Italy in the company of Luftwaffe chief and *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring. It was driven home to Rommel again that he was a mere servant of the Italians and supposed to deal with them about the campaign. The purpose of this Rome detour was to make atonement to Mussolini for defiantly leaving the battlefield. Göring was allegedly supposed to smooth things over and act as an intermediary to obtain resolutions to whatever problems Rommel was having. To this end, Göring would supposedly be ‘invested with extraordinary powers’ to obtain results from the Italians. It was made clear that Göring would conduct all discussions and negotiations with the Italian authorities, not Rommel, who was to accompany him only as a penitent bystander. Rommel had come seeking support from his leadership but had been sent away in disgrace.

‘It was clear to me that Adolf Hitler did not *want* to see the reality of conditions and defended himself on the basis of emotion against what his own intellect must have been telling him’, Rommel wrote. Allegedly the details of this meeting as Rommel told them to his family and others close to him were much worse than what he penned in his memoirs. His encounter with Hitler was more explosive and venomous than he was willing to put on paper during the war. Never again did Hitler make any pretence of being empathetic to Rommel after this meeting. Rommel’s heart was already consumed with anger against Hitler in North Africa following

the ‘victory or death’ order given to him at El Alamein, which he bitterly regretted ever obeying and had left him with a wounded conscience. The rancour he had just witnessed from Hitler made his antipathy even worse. Hitler openly turned against not only Rommel but had insulted his troops by accusing them of cowardice. Rommel sincerely loved his troops and would have bristled at such slurs against his men more than anything; it explains why he went through great pains in his writings to demonstrate that his men were not cowards. Hitler’s denunciation of the troops for alleged cowardice was something Rommel would denounce in his writings. Judging from all aspects of Rommel’s character, beliefs, and experiences, this further victimization of his men would have been an offence he would never have forgiven. He had just taken a further step along the path of rebelling against Hitler – a path from which there would be no return.

A Dagger in the Back

At this time an unforeseen rival stepped in to further push Rommel off the edge of success. *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring had long been one of Hitler’s closest personal associates. Göring had been gunning for glory since time immemorial. His wives mirrored his ambitions – his first was a wealthy and well-connected aristocrat, and his second was an actress and influential society hostess. He considered himself so illustrious that he demanded only the finest possessions and sported ridiculous custom-made uniforms. He had several lavish residences which he furnished with art and other expensive objects plundered from victims of Nazi tyranny. One of his ‘estates’ was his own private lodge near Hitler’s abode at the Obersalzberg, where he hunted mountain goats, kept a pet lion and was known to walk around wearing togas and nail varnish. Once he greeted Goebbels at the door wearing a strange garment that the propaganda minister somewhat disdainfully guessed was intended as ‘a type of baroque’ outfit. When US forces eventually captured Göring in 1945, he was also found to be addicted to drugs. In total, Göring’s hunger for power and outlandish behaviour is reflected in the lives of other crime lords throughout history.

Göring had been watching Rommel's rapid ascent from his own high perch with displeasure. While propaganda master Goebbels perceived shared advantages in Rommel's successes, Göring did not. He had kept quiet enough while things were going in Rommel's favour. Now that Rommel's star was in decline and he had been cast from the mercy of Hitler, Göring saw a chance to drive daggers into Rommel to make sure he would never rise again.

Nor did Göring bother to hide his claws. He had no reason to tiptoe around Rommel any longer now that Hitler had withdrawn his grace and castigated him in front of all officers and staff present at his HQ with spectacular venom. With Rommel delivered into his hands like some kind of disobedient ward of the state, Göring saw his chance to inflict maximum damage. He would insult and disparage Rommel to his face, denounce him for cowardice and neglect of Italians in front of Mussolini and – most damningly – do his best to behave in as rude and accusatory manner to the Italians as possible. This blow to German-Italian relations with Rommel as the alleged cause would sabotage any chance of Rommel's future successes in North Africa. Göring's level of discourtesy was so pronounced that it shocked Ciano and other Italian officials, and Rommel as well.

The journey to Rome with Göring was hard for Rommel to handle. Tension between the two men reached such a level that Rommel lost his ability to speak out of sheer anger. Göring took an openly condescending attitude towards Rommel and made it clear he saw him as a hysterical pessimist while he himself believed victory was still possible. On the brink of totally losing his temper, Rommel bit his lip and kept silent. Göring was not bothered and instead addressed himself to Rommel's wife Lucie, who Göring invited along for the ride. They discussed jewellery and films. Rommel became angry at his wife as she chatted with Göring and ignored her for the duration of the train journey as well, much to her own indignation. 'I was very embittered about the total lack of understanding of our highest authorities and their tendency to hold the frontline troops responsible for their own errors. My anger rose to an even more extreme degree when I was forced to witness the antics of the *Reichsmarschall*

[Göring] in his special train', wrote Rommel. 'The situation did not seem to make the least impression on him at all.'

The Duce's wrath had already been provoked by Rommel's unauthorized jaunt to see Hitler. Mussolini informed German military attaches that he would have court-martialled an Italian general for doing such a thing – making it clear he expected the Germans to punish their errant Rommel. 'Now Göring comes to settle the trouble', wrote Ciano on 30 November, adding that aside from the matter of wounded pride, it was an opportune time to hold a summit to air strategic grievances between Rommel, Bastico and other Italian military officials over their divergent views of the best next course of action to take in North Africa.

High-level discussions were held at the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, Mussolini's downtown residence and headquarters. The palace was replete with ancient Roman busts, an interior garden, and towers. The Duce used the place as an office space and it became famous as the venue for his grand speeches which he gave to the crowds of Rome from a balcony overlooking the piazza outside.

The meetings were unproductive for Rommel. Again he was placed in the position of trying to argue his point of view and request answers from people who were neither interested in listening to him nor providing answers to the questions he posed. Göring savagely threw him under the bus by accusing him in front of Mussolini of abandoning the Italians to their doom at El Alamein. Surprisingly, while Rommel was reeling from the verbal blow, Mussolini came to his defence and told Rommel that he thought his retreat had been 'a masterpiece'. Despite parroting Hitler's 'victory or death' orders, the Duce apparently appreciated the fact that Italian soldiers were still alive and fighting in Libya due to Rommel's endeavours. But this was not the end of Rommel's Italian troubles.

While in Rome, Göring would systematically offend every Italian official he came into contact with and do his best to shove Rommel into the crossfire. Naturally this gave rise to offence, tore open old wounds and brought fresh grievances at a time when the Axis alliance was already declining to its weakest point. Ciano's sources in the German embassy informed him that Göring's pointedly arrogant behaviour had astonished

even the German military officials stationed there, who were trying to come up with various theories about why he was deliberately stepping on so many Italian toes. Ciano became convinced Göring was trying to place 'blame for everything . . . upon our poor organization of transports, ships, railroads, et cetera. For this reason he has begun to snub everyone, including Admiral [Arturo] Riccardi.' Riccardi frequently liaised with high-level German naval counterparts including Admirals Karl Dönitz and Erich Raeder. Ciano further described that 'Göring has made an extremely bad impression, even on our officers of the High Command. Colonel [Giuseppe Cordero Lanza di] Montezemolo … said that he was surprised by the "proud ignorance" of the *Reichsmarschall*.' Montezemolo served in Rommel's army in North Africa, where he was promoted and decorated several times for valour. He would later join the Italian Resistance fighting on behalf of the Allies and be arrested and shot by the Nazis in 1944. Both Riccardi and Montezemolo were men who had worked well with Germans and the fact that Göring now treated them with scorn added further insult to the injury of his rudeness. The Luftwaffe chief patronizingly told the Italians that 'our efforts will have to be redoubled if we wish to avoid further grief in Africa. We, too, had come to this conclusion without the need of his precious insight', wrote Ciano sourly.

Rommel marvelled at Göring's spectacular incivility towards the Italians. 'Although we had always been forbidden to say a word to the Italians about the shortcomings of their army and state, or to demand improvements, Göring now began to talk to Cavallero about really fundamental questions, such as the poor Italian armament, their sea strategy and similar thorny subjects', wrote Rommel. 'The only result, of course, was that he put their backs up without having any hope of getting anything put right'. Göring cunningly managed to place Rommel's campaign at the front and centre of all of these unpleasant discussions. In doing so, he made it appear as though Rommel was behind all of the accusations and causing the fracas.

Replacing Rommel's Army in Africa

Amid his rampage of discourtesy, Göring took steps to manoeuvre himself into a prime role to usurp Rommel's position. 'Above all Göring possessed an abnormal level of ambition that he could never satisfy', wrote Rommel, adding that he believed Göring 'wanted to get me sacked in order to realize his own ambitions in North Africa'.

True to Rommel's predictions, Göring had worked out a backroom deal with Hitler to deploy Luftwaffe troops and a 'Hermann Göring' Panzer division to North Africa, in addition to other Panzer units with propaganda-flavoured names. By the time of Rommel's trip, Göring's Panzers were already on their way to Tunis. Göring aimed to kick Rommel out of the picture and take over the scene himself – out with the Desert Fox and in with the *Reichsmarschall,* lord of the Luftwaffe and Third Reich superstar.

Göring promised Mussolini he would rectify the situation personally and, as a show of good faith, avowed that the three Panzer divisions with highly symbolic names were being sent to North Africa: these were to be called the Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring and the Deutschland Divisions respectively. Ciano didn't think much of the naming scheme but Mussolini liked the sound of more tanks. The Hermann Göring Division, already en route during the conference, was destined for Tunis. There were of course no plans to send it to the relief of Rommel's forces at El Agheila.

A whole new Panzer army would be formed on 10 December 1942 – one that had virtually nothing to do with Rommel and neatly cut him out of the picture. Fresh German troops sent to Tunis, ostensibly to deal with the threat from Allied forces that landed during Operation Torch, would be known as the Fifth Panzer Army. This new army would be commanded by General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim – who incidentally, in a Machiavellian chess move on the part of Hitler, would soon end up replacing Rommel as commander of all Axis forces in North Africa in 1943. 'Unfortunately very little coordination existed between this new command and ourselves', wrote Rommel. 'We badly felt the need during this period of a single authority on African soil which could have welded together under a common command the two armies whose fates were so closely dependent on each other.' But it was not to be. In fact, it was unwanted. When Rommel tried to ask about operations in Tunis, Hitler bluntly told him to 'leave Tunis out' of his

‘calculations and simply act on the assumption that the bridgehead [in North Africa] would be held’. In other words, the Fifth Panzer Army did not belong to Rommel and he was not to interfere with it.

Supplies intended for Rommel’s army started being diverted to Tunis to assist Von Arnim in December 1942, which plunged Rommel into further despair. Ever anxious to please the Führer and the High Command, Kesselring threw in his lot with the top Nazis and betrayed Rommel’s trust, deliberately diverting shipments of new 88mm guns that Rommel had urgently asked for away from his army. The guns were shipped to Von Arnim’s army in Tunis. ‘It was unfortunate but true that in matters of supply Kesselring behaved in a very uncomradely spirit towards us and thought only of himself’, Rommel wrote. Rommel could see he was being sidelined. He knew his combat troops would pay the ultimate price. He complained that no coordination existed between the two armies – his and Von Arnim’s ‘replacement’ army – and he believed this lack of cohesion was yet another factor that contributed to the ultimate Axis loss of North Africa. Von Arnim would not work with Rommel because he was intended to be his replacement. All of this was a direct result of Rommel’s fall from grace – and of Göring’s efforts to oust him and seize control for himself of a new army in North Africa.

Rommel was in disgrace and Hitler had written off the once celebrated Afrika Korps as dispensable. In a postscript to his North African memoirs written shortly before his death in 1944, Rommel blamed Göring wholesale for influencing events to bring about the defeat and captivity of his desert army.

The End of All Faith

Rommel ultimately received no clarity regarding his situation. In fact, his orders became even more confused. A plan he suggested to pull his troops further back to Gabes in Tunisia was at first accepted by Göring but then torpedoed by Kesselring. Mussolini was determined the troops should hold on at El Agheila and so apparently was Hitler. However, Mussolini and the Italian authorities were swayed by Rommel’s fear of Montgomery and,

feeling nervous, authorized him to take what amounted to a half-step back – sending his non-motorized, or in other words potentially stranded, Italian infantry rearward to a second line of defence at Buerat. This partial retreat was prompted by Italian desire to conserve what manpower it possibly could. The rest of the army was supposed to stand at El Agheila. The Italians didn't want to lose more territory.

Göring seconded the motion of staying put at El Agheila, but further muddled the issue by suggesting that 'if possible' Rommel also begin attacking Montgomery from El Agheila at the same time. The failure in consensus ultimately resorted in Rommel being ordered to hold fast, withdraw and attack all at the same time – possibly one of the few instances in military history when a commander has been instructed to execute all of those very different things from a single position at once.

Believing the lives of his troops were now totally at the mercy of heartless political manoeuvring, Rommel fell more deeply into inner desolation. In Rome, he seized the opportunity to have a serious private discussion with his wife in which he unburdened his mind without having to worry about spies listening or censors reading his mail. He told her emphatically he believed the whole war was lost.

What remaining hopes he had in the ability of Axis leaders to be, if not compassionate towards the men, then at least rational, were utterly lost. His thoughts remained with his troops. 'Flying back to Africa I realized that … to keep the army from being destroyed as the result of some crazy order or other would need all our skill', he wrote.

Gales On the Wings of Victory

On the British side of the fence, political pressure was also mounting for Montgomery to take action. Rumours spread by Tedder and Coningham had made their way back to London and were being whispered in the halls of power in December 1942. These false rumours alleged that Montgomery was wasting time in his pursuit of Rommel. Brooke quickly got to the bottom of the rumours and traced their origins. 'I felt convinced that they were unjustified', he wrote, adding that the airmen were 'entirely

disconnected with the administrative problems of supply', unversed in 'the requirements of land tactics', and 'too free in offering criticisms' of the Army in general.

The criticisms had reached the irascible ears of Winston Churchill who had naturally become annoyed with the idea of yet another general being too slow in going in for the kill in North Africa. Yet Monty had already proven himself as a fighter, as Brooke reminded the Prime Minister, and after due inquiries of his own provided Churchill with reassurance there was nothing unusual about the difficulties Monty was experiencing during his rapid pursuit of Rommel. Brooke also defended Monty from unfair criticisms aimed at him by the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, whose knowledge of military affairs Brooke correctly dismissed as 'superficial' during a conference with Eden and Churchill.

As Axis poise declined, British spirits enjoyed a distinct boost not only thanks to Montgomery's victory at El Alamein but his chase of Rommel. The mighty Desert Fox, once seen as invincible in the eyes of the world, now came across as a pathetic figure doomed to flee for his life. This was an underestimation of Rommel – one that has persisted even to the present day. He still had plenty of ingenuity in addition to new resources and even advantages with which to fight – which Montgomery realized. However, at the time, Rommel was merely perceived in Allied countries in light of having been taken down several notches from his previously unassailable conquering pedestal. It was a good boost for the Allies, but gave rise to false notions about Rommel's skills and actual war fighting potential in later years.

The Germans had finally taken a huge beating in North Africa at British hands thanks to Montgomery. Monty's bold pursuit of Rommel also had the domino effect of causing increasing friction between Axis commanders and tipping Italy steadily out of the war. These were developments that changed the course of the war irrevocably in a positive direction – the direction of an Allied victory. No matter what his rivals or post-war critics tried to say to disparage his achievements, it remains a fact that Montgomery was the architect of these pivotal successes. At this time, his star was rising as Rommel's glory was fading.

Nevertheless Montgomery could not rest easy. Apart from wanting to wreck Rommel's army on his own initiative, he was now under pressure to take action at El Agheila as soon as possible – not only from his political leadership but also due to the rapidly crumbling morale of his troops. The atmosphere of the place spooked them so much that Monty was noticing a steady erosion of their confidence and thus in their fighting value. 'I therefore decided that I must get possession of the Agheila position quickly; morale might decline if we hung about looking at it too long', Montgomery wrote.

CHAPTER 10

THE ROAR OF BATTLE

’Wisdom and fortune combating together,
If that the former dare but what it can,
No chance may shake it’.

William Shakespeare,
Antony & Cleopatra, Act III, Sc.11

The clash that would decide whether Montgomery or Rommel would hold the portal to Egypt began unexpectedly on a cold December night during the Advent of what would be a very different Christmas for the world in 1942. The Advent season is typically associated with a sense of quiet anticipation. This one proved especially portentous. Two armies had been waiting for the moment when they would rise to do battle. The outcome, in the mind of each general leading the troops, would be irreversible and alter the course of global affairs. Yet neither Monty nor the Fox were ready to meet this moment. The fight would seemingly erupt out of nowhere, forcing them to grapple with each other when they felt vulnerable and not at their best. Wary of one another’s strength, both felt crushed by the weight of their

responsibilities to their troops – neither wanted to let his men down. Driven on like attack dogs by political masters who demanded that they succeed, they knew they would have no choice but to maul each other at the first opportunity.

True to its nature, the mighty Sahara desert had stripped away all pretences of military glory and confidence that both generals possessed. Montgomery and Rommel were more aware of their own weaknesses than ever before. Keenly conscious of the risks they faced, they were alone and surrounded by the enormity of grand events in an eerie quiet made more ominous by the weight of its silence. This December battle was one of the hardest both generals would face during the war, because it was a fight in which each man, overwhelmed like a tiny speck beneath the infinite desert stars, felt the most worried about the consequences of failure and the least confident in himself.

The Hunter Returns

Montgomery returned from what he described as ‘a very pleasant weekend’ in Cairo. Rooming at the British Embassy, he had delighted in startling the congregation of St. George’s cathedral church by reading the lesson during a Sunday evening service in an unannounced appearance. The victor of El Alamein realized how popular he had become after returning to the glittering Nile metropolis. He did not describe the results of his planned meeting with Alexander, nor identify who else he visited or how exactly he spent his time in the wicked city – although while there he did proudly sit for a portrait by notable wartime artist Captain Neville Lewis of South Africa. The portrait, appreciated by some, was not one of the best made of Monty and failed to capture the assertive upward tilt of his head, his slight confident smile and the sharp glint in his eye that can be seen in a photograph of the portrait sitting. While he may have felt uncertain about what results the battle at El Agheila would bring, Monty was clearly making hay while the sun of his recent victory was shining and rightfully enjoying the fruits of his hard-earned success at El Alamein. The mischievous

Montgomery admitted he thought it was ‘rather fun’ to have ‘created quite a stir’ in Cairo. He was fresh and raring to fight by the time he got back.

‘When I got back to my headquarters just east of Benghazi, I found preparations for facing up to the Agheila position were well advanced’, wrote Monty. He also noticed his opponent was anxious. The Fox was rustling around in his nest. Some of the Italian troops were apparently shifting backwards, ostensibly to Buerat, located about four hours down the coastal road. Although aware ‘reports during the first week in December indicated that Rommel was sending the Italians west’, according to Monty, he also noticed the enemy ‘showed no signs of evacuating’ from El Agheila. Indeed the rest of Rommel’s force was staying put. Any movements to the rear were slight and occurring surreptitiously. What was Rommel up to? Having had plenty of experience in chasing his foe, Monty sensed that Rommel was getting slippery. Something was afoot.

’It seemed the enemy was becoming nervous about our preparations’, wrote Monty. The plan was not quite ready. Montgomery had originally designated 15 December as the operation’s launch date but eventually adjusted the date to 14 December. Keeping a steady eye on Rommel, it became increasingly clear to Monty that if he didn’t beat him to the punch, the Fox would be the first to make a move and ‘set the tone’ on the battlefield. It went against Monty’s credo to let his enemy make the first move in a decisive battle and force Monty to dance to a different beat. Monty bowed to no one and would never allow himself to be dictated to. There would be no chess games here – only another knockout round at his pleasure. That meant that he would have to pounce on Rommel as soon as possible. Despite the weakness in his position, Monty was now reinvigorated and willing to make a lunge.

The Fox As Prey

Rommel, in the meantime, had returned to North Africa in a daze of misery. He had taken zero R&R since his miscarried trip to Austria that had ended in October 1942. His visits to Germany and Rome had given him no respite from his woes or exhaustion. He enjoyed no city glamours nor the grins of

adoring fans. He had found only scorn, denunciations and dismissals from leaders he hoped would recognize his sincerity as a soldier and spare his troops some degree of empathy. Even his wife Lucie had infuriated him during the trip to Rome by chatting about trivialities with his rival Hermann Göring. Rommel had told her the war was lost, but she retained by her own later admission a faith in Hitler until the time of Rommel's death in 1944. Her apparent lack of understanding meant that Rommel ended up confiding his deepest fears and worries to their teenage son Manfred, who loved and understood his father but was hardly in a position to support him. Rommel was utterly alone. Still exhausted from chronic insomnia and the physical strains of a nomadic Saharan existence, he returned to the front with more bitterness, and above all else, more anger.

The hardened desert warrior, now considering his own fate bound up with the lives of his men more than ever, did not hesitate to tell his subordinates everything that had happened – about Hitler, Göring, the Italians, and the all-out abandonment of the army's fortunes. Speaking openly of these things brought risks. Yet Rommel was looking death in the face and resolved to perish or be captured with his army. He had already argued with Hitler head-on and made his views clear. Whatever political risks there were in voicing his objections had been taken and didn't matter anymore. 'My staff in Africa were profoundly shocked when they learned what little appreciation our highest command had shown for our position', he wrote. He expressed the view that his army had become a 'victim' of its own masters.

Despair though he might, Rommel still had enough spunk and indignation left in him to try to prevent his troops from being crushed outright. Upon his return to Libya, he became painfully aware of the glowering gaze of Monty fixed on him from across a relatively short distance. The Germans suspected a major British attack would take place sometime in the middle of December. Additionally they had noticed enemy aerial reconnaissance sweeping the desert to the south of El Agheila. The British had created supply dumps and British patrols were spotted in the shimmering haze of the dune sea. This increased Rommel's worries about an outflanking manoeuvre. However, he was still unaware of the timing of

the Eighth Army's attack and the elaborate lengths Monty was prepared to go through to try to snap his army up in one gulp.

Up until this point, things had been quiet at El Agheila. Too quiet. Rommel had learned from raw past experiences what happened when the sly Monty appeared to be doing nothing for an extended period. It was like the stillness that falls over a field of tall grass before a lurking tiger suddenly attacks. Rommel became convinced his crafty enemy was ready to strike immediately. This was one of those times where Rommel's legendary 'sixth sense' – dubbed '*Fingerspitzengefühl*', or a 'feeling in the fingertips', by his officers – came into play. He had no evidence that he was in imminent danger of getting ambushed by Monty but could feel the creeping sensation in his bones that something dreadful was underway.

Rommel's instructions from his political chiefs had been muddled, but one thing was made clear: he was supposed to make a stand and fight. Bitter resistance would be demanded of him once the battle got underway. It had even been suggested he attack Monty first. Indeed Rommel himself strongly considered this possibility. But after witnessing Hitler's hysterical rage in Europe, learning of Göring's shameless but successful bids to replace his army with Von Arnim's, and having no faith in Italian promises, Rommel was now utterly convinced any engagement with Monty would result in nothing more than a massacre of Axis troops.

To Keep A Promise

Faced with the lurking menace of Monty, Rommel decided to save his men's lives by disobeying all orders to fight and slipping away quietly. Mussolini had already given him permission to shift Italian forces back to Buerat. This gave Rommel a political loophole to exploit. He was unwilling to fight a head-to-head battle with Montgomery as at El Alamein. A fugitive army was still a living army. Rommel succeeded in frightening the previously resilient Bastico into fundamentally agreeing with him, emphasizing their low fuel supplies – although the Luftwaffe had managed to provide the army with 5,000 tons of fuel throughout the month of November. Although now more dubious of their abilities to succeed in a

stand-off, Bastico stuck to his core mission to cling to remaining Italian territory as much as possible and obey the Duce. Instead of giving Rommel a full endorsement to retreat, Bastico instead opted to communicate the situation to Europe to ask for aid and request instructions.

But Rommel was done with Europe and with instructions. He had already made up his mind to move out. ‘Our first idea had been not to attempt a withdrawal until enough petrol was available to get the whole force back [at once]’, Rommel wrote, adding that he changed his mind on 5 December due to his belief Monty would act sooner. Rather than allocate his available fuel for fighting vehicles, Rommel opted to use it to transport Italian infantry back to Buerat. The Buerat position, about four hours away, was much less advantageous than El Agheila and offered little in the way of natural defences from enemy troops. Sitting like a lone button on a large and flat expanse, it lent itself to envelopment and could easily be surrounded. Leaving El Agheila for Buerat was like abandoning the high ground of a rocky cliff for a vulnerable open field. This was neither a very safe nor wise proposition. Rommel would later argue that his actions served a larger strategic purpose. However, given that he was already well aware that Hitler had no further strategic use for his army, Rommel’s decision to use his fuel supplies to get troops away was less of a sound military tactic than a panicked and emotional, albeit well-intended, effort to preserve lives.

The Fox doubted he could manage to escape from Monty’s clutches. On 8 December he scribbled an early birthday letter to his son Manfred, who would turn 14 years old on Christmas Eve. He warned the boy about the possibility that he might not return home. ‘The war is very hard and it looks doubtful whether I shall be permitted to return to you … If it goes on like this, we shall be crushed … It is a bitter fate for my soldiers and me to have to go through this at the end of so heroic and victorious a struggle’, he wrote. ‘You must realize the seriousness of the situation … It is not impossible that you might soon have to stand on your own feet’, he warned his son. ‘The times could become very, very hard … Be guided by your mother, who always has your best interests at heart.’ To prepare himself for possible capture, Rommel wrote to his wife days later to ask her to send him an English-German dictionary by courier.

However Rommel also vowed to his son that he would do his utmost to avoid being defeated in battle. Even if his political leadership – and the rest of the world – ultimately interpreted his actions as cowardice, this was a promise Rommel fully intended to keep. Despite advantages he possessed in the terrain and additional supplies he had received, Rommel thought withdrawing was his best option. Falling back on subtlety and deception was key to this plan. Rommel suspected that Montgomery was creeping in for the kill. Silence and stealth were all he demanded from his men now. One false move and he feared that his watchful enemy would notice and swoop down upon him. 'I was certain that if the British once got wind of our intentions they would attack immediately', wrote Rommel. That is exactly what happened.

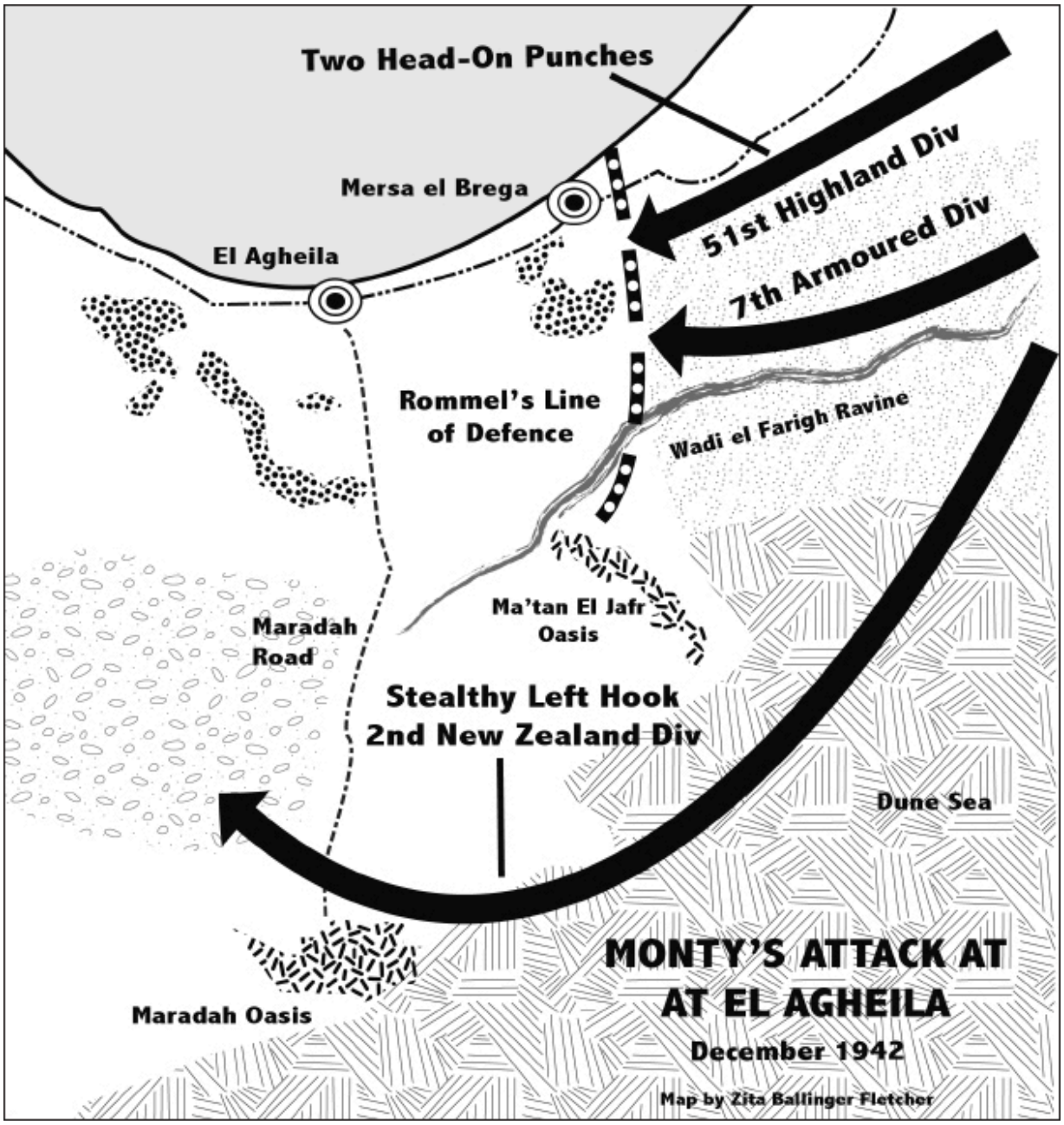
An Accidental Trigger

Whisking Italian and German infantrymen away in trucks after nightfall was a classic Rommel move. This covert tectonic shift was very much like something he would have done as a young man fighting in the mountains of Slovenia during the First World War – albeit back then Rommel would have been loath not to take the offensive. He used to believe in always attacking, but now his mantra, to the disgust of everyone around him, was only retreat. This procedure went well enough for a few days. But only for a few days. Unfortunately for the Desert Fox, his gamble was dependent on Italian truck drivers to somehow be as quiet as mice when moving their comrades back and forth – a critical component of his plan which perhaps anyone might have told him was doomed to fail. Things became considerably louder and messier than he had ever wanted. 'In spite of the need for secrecy … the Italians made an atrocious din and some of their vehicles even drove back through the moonlit night with blazing headlights', Rommel wrote.

The racket inevitably drew the hawkish eyes of Monty. Aware that his foe was getting restless, Monty had bumped his attack launch date up from 14 December up to two days earlier. He ended up springing into action even sooner. The Fox was about to get away. Now was the moment to pounce

and let the fur fly. On the night of 11 December, Monty gave orders for the attack to begin immediately. An artillery barrage shattered the stillness of the pitch-dark winter night. The barrage would allow the British to hit long-range targets while their tanks scrambled into action. Monty also hoped the bombardment would draw Rommel's attention and distract him from the long arm of the New Zealanders blazing a path through the wild Libyan desert, aiming to strike Rommel from behind.

The stillness of the desert night exploded into a frenzy. Artillery blazed like fire. The RAF thundered down from on high as Monty called in air strikes. With a carpet of smoke and fire spread rolled out ahead of them for their grand entrance, the men of the 51st Highland Division started charging down the coastal road to hit Rommel's position head-on. The intrepid Desert Rats of the 7th Armoured Division formed Monty's left hook and started battering at the Axis fortifications. Unseen by all, the New Zealanders crept through the heart of the desert to dispatch Rommel's army with an execution style blow from behind.



Map 3. Monty's Attack at El Agheila, December 1942.

Closing In For the Kill

At first Rommel was unsure what exactly was going on or what target area Monty was aiming for. Having suspected an outflanking manoeuvre, he was at first thrown off by the frontal assault by the Highlanders and the nearby forays of the Desert Rats. Monty was good at flummoxing the Fox with the

intricacies of his plans. Facing what must have eerily reminded him of El Alamein, Rommel overestimated what his nemesis was up to. ‘The British made attack after attack against our strongpoints in the north and south and soon there was no more doubt – the enemy offensive had opened’, he wrote later. This was only the foretaste of Monty’s assault and not the main thrust of the attack. However, Rommel readily assumed the worst.

There was already no question in Rommel’s mind that he was going to pull out. All that was left was for him to order the troops to cut and run. He sounded the retreat and ‘an unbroken stream of fighting troops and transport moved off to the west’, he wrote. What he did not write was the fate these troops met with at the hands of the RAF. Trapped inside the coastal bottleneck Rommel had failed to exploit, the fleeing troops along the seaside highway were now easy prey for the RAF. Instead of Monty’s troops being trapped between the desert and the sea, Rommel’s troops were now in that same situation. The British bombers reaped a gruesome harvest – or, as Monty ruthlessly put it, ‘did great execution on the coast road’.

Booby traps took their toll on the British. Explosions ripped through the sand, shattered vehicles and tore men up with bloody bursts. Just as at El Alamein, Monty’s troops persevered. The Highlanders doggedly bashed their way through Rommel’s eastern defences. The Desert Rats toiled onward and despite fierce opposition succeeded in piercing eastward through Rommel’s rearguard. The next day the Desert Rats reached El Agheila itself and seized the coastal nexus of a main crossroads linking El Agheila to a lone inhabited dot in the otherwise blank slate of the southern desert known as the Maradah oasis.

Adding to the mayhem were SAS forces moving ahead of Monty’s lines and striking weak targets in the Panzer Army’s rear. As he was wont to do, Rommel mistakenly believed these were members of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). The SAS raiders severed lines of communication, blew up supply dumps, attacked supply lorries and sowed havoc behind Rommel’s lines, adding a dimension of terror to the unfolding battle. They also laid mines for Axis troops themselves to stumble across with deadly effects. ‘Hunting this group [the SAS] was very hard because it only popped up briefly and then vanished again in the desert, without anyone

being able to track it down there', wrote Rommel, who later in December would attempt to follow British tracks in the desert accompanied by his staff in the hopes of shadowing and catching SAS troopers.

Monty himself was trying to catch – and kill – as many Axis troops as possible, which was a difficult task as they were embedded firmly behind an inferno of blistering sand, rocks and explosives and were starting to disperse. The British rushed forward into the fray. 'In spite of the great caution imposed on our troops by the mines and booby traps of all kinds, we succeeded in following up closely', wrote Monty.

In The Deep Dune Sea

In the meantime the New Zealanders set off into the dune abyss with the goal of outmanoeuvring Rommel and wedging themselves behind him to block his escape and blast him from behind. To the amazement of everyone around them – including their Eighth Army comrades, the enemy and even Monty himself – the New Zealanders made short work of the hellish ocean of sand and rocks. Monty described their manoeuvre as 'a remarkably rapid advance'. They had little trouble with the ravine of Wadi el Farigh, sailing clear around it to the south.

A long stretch of lonely highway connected El Agheila to the oasis town called Maradah far to the south. There was literally nothing around Maradah except for thousands of ways to die in the dust or get lost. The highway was perhaps the lone exception. It was a long empty string of a road strewn in the middle of a shimmering hot void. It cut an eerie appearance through the sand sea, as if some desert Titan had built a path to nowhere and left it there to confuse mortals. The New Zealanders reached a spot on this desolate highway about 50km north of the Maradah oasis. Then they wheeled upwards toward the coastal road and the beckoning vista of the Mediterranean.

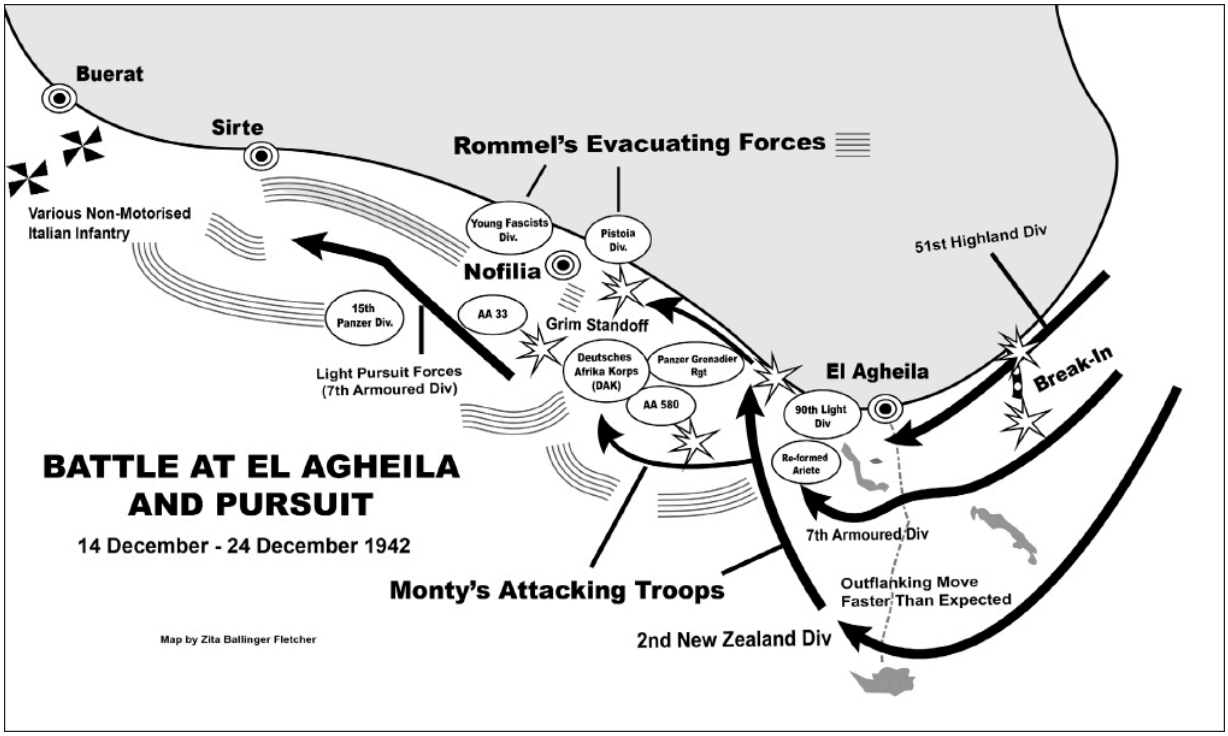
The New Zealanders were moving so fast that they had a good chance of corking Rommel's belligerent genie firmly in the Eighth Army's bottle. Much to Rommel's indignation, a Cairo radio station made a similar comparison on air – although they did not give the beleaguered Rommel the

credit of likening him to a genie. The Fox's staff were listening to foreign radio broadcasts as the battle unfolded and distinctly heard a triumphant voice in English announce that Montgomery was about to plug Rommel's army into a bottle. Rommel sardonically quipped that the bottle would be empty if only they could get more fuel. But fuel was neither the beginning nor the end of the troubles that actually placed Rommel in this predicament. It was merely one aspect of the situation he chose to focus on and magnify to himself and others. The underlying crisis of conscience and emotion that saw him choosing a vicious cycle of fleeing and freezing was more difficult for him to face.

In an ironic twist of fate, it was Rommel who now feared the sight of a wave of British tanks materializing from a veil of dust on the horizon of El Agheila. The fate he had inflicted on the Eighth Army twice before was now being turned upon him. Like his foes in the past, it was he who was now frantic to get away and considering how far he could retreat. Desperate to discern Monty's intentions, Rommel requested aerial reconnaissance from the Luftwaffe to see if they could spot any columns sneaking up on him from the dunes he had formerly felt sure were unnavigable to the British. His relationship with the Luftwaffe at the time could not politely be called poor, but nevertheless they cooperated and the aerial reconnaissance came through. The Luftwaffe discerned British tanks manoeuvring through the dune sea. Apart from the Luftwaffe reconnaissance, Rommel claimed to have captured a British patrol near the Maradah highway and ascertained that these men were paving the way for the New Zealanders' outflanking manoeuvre. 'Thus Montgomery's intentions were finally clear', he wrote, inadvertently admitting he had been bamboozled at the battle's outset. Again Monty successfully managed to keep him in the dark until the very moment of crisis.

Once more Rommel underestimated Monty's Eighth Army. He had got used to a sheepish army – troops he largely viewed as substandard desert warriors unsuited to bold cross-country movement. But Monty had hardened these men, imbued them with newfound grit, confidence and above all a will to be bold and fight hard. Rommel doubted the British would have the gumption to cut across this formidable wasteland, which is

why he left an open weakness exposed to the desert. Thinking he could barter for more supplies to make a stand, Rommel presumed the desert would pose an almost insurmountable obstacle for Monty to overcome at any great speed and assumed that the desert would do his work for him in holding the British off for a while. He also underestimated British leadership again, thinking that if anything Monty would try to cut across the desert, prove too clumsy at it and give the Axis enough time to pack up their rucksacks and march off in an orderly manner. He had no inkling that Monty would send a division of angry Scottish Highlanders barrelling straight down the coastal road at him in addition to other aggressive encircling manoeuvres. Again, as at El Alamein, Rommel had taken the desert – and Monty – for granted based on his past experiences, and again he was proven wrong.



Map 4 Battle at El Agheila and Pursuit, 11 December – 24 December 1942.

The Afrika Korps Strikes Back

Like a desert sidewinder snake, Rommel continued thrashing at Monty's forces while trying to pull his troops back in various spots. The British were coming at him thick and fast from all directions, requiring him to beat them off even whilst pulling his men back. He knew his army risked total collapse. The front started to crack wide open, even as Rommel, in a fury of despair, saw weaknesses among Montgomery's units. In some areas Monty seemed even to have been slightly careless about the dispositions of his attacking columns – gaps were left exposed that, if Rommel had been at his former strength, would have tempted disaster. This stung the Desert Fox's pride. He was galled at being in such an inferior position that Monty had not bothered to put up full guards against him. In these moments Rommel regretted not being able to plunge his Panzer units into the heart of the Eighth Army, or at least to have made a try.

'It infuriated me to an indescribable degree that I was compelled to watch how the opponent gave us chances for effective counterblows', Rommel wrote. He speculated that he could have set up a roadblock to trap Monty's troops at a narrow passage further along in the El Agheila bottleneck and then annihilate them with fire from armoured units. He blamed his misfortunes as usual on lack of fuel. Arguably Rommel could have set up a roadblock and used what fresh armoured units, new fuel supplies and infantry he had available to attempt something of this nature. He had, after all, taken even more daring actions during the First World War with only handfuls of infantrymen at his disposal, and had met with success against overwhelming odds numerous times just by sheer creativity. The truth was that Rommel, still reeling from the carnage at El Alamein and the betrayals of Hitler and other German leaders, had been so focused on trying to save his troops' lives by evacuation that he lacked the will and initiative to attempt to hold the territory. Ideas for how to counter-attack seem to have occurred to him only during the battle as he was provoked to anger at being deceived, thrashed and stomped on yet again by Montgomery.

Monty knew the soft underbelly of the Eighth Army was showing but this was no longer any concern to him. He could see Rommel had decided to run, and thus had chosen a defensive position instead of a dominant role on the battlefield. This gave Monty the opportunity to set the tone of the

battle – a role at which he excelled. The formidable desert fortress of El Agheila was splintering to pieces, and as it started to topple, the advantages Rommel might have used against him had disappeared. Monty took the initiative everywhere, forcing Rommel, whose mantra had once been to take the initiative, to respond to him.

The Panzer Army was far from cohesive at this time. Once united in a common purpose, old Afrika Korps veterans were mixed among fresh troops primarily from Italy. The Italians rallied under Bastico, who wanted to stay and fight. The Germans fought for Rommel, who wanted to pull back. Fighting became 'intense and confused', according to Montgomery, as various units advanced and retreated, fought and surrendered and escaped. British and German units took each other prisoner multiple times after managing to escape under exchanges of fire over the course of days. Taking prisoners might have seemed straightforward enough, but nothing was ever straightforward in the shifting sands. The Sahara had not lost its ability to bewilder and bewitch people.

Contrary to Rommel's directives, his German units mounted increasingly hefty resistance from 13 to 16 December. Rommel had welded his Afrika Korps men into fierce warriors of the dunes. Fleeing for a long period of time was unnatural to them. Despite discouragement that weighed them down during their retreat, the battle blew the lid off their anger at the British and gave the Germans another chance to avenge their defeat at El Alamein. Despite Rommel being in the throes of a crushing spiritual crisis, the bruised Panzer Army had not lost its fighting soul.

Bastico's faith in the Italians' ability to make a stand was vindicated during the battle. While the Ariete Division had been annihilated at El Alamein, some of its splintered remnants had merged with new Italian units to form a resurrected unit called the Combat Group Ariete. These Italians had been placed in the desert south-west of El Agheila, forming a wedge between a glittering salt marsh and the German 90th Light Division. As Monty's troops closed in approaching the salt marsh, the Italians made every effort to repel them. In a battle that lasted non-stop for nearly 10 hours, the Italians staved off an attack by about eighty British tanks. Another Italian counter-attack by the newly arrived Centauro Armoured

Regiment repelled the attack temporarily. By skilful use of the difficult terrain and desperate determination to hold on, the Italians succeeded in taking out about twenty-two British tanks.

Apart from a revived Ariete, the British also faced the reincarnation of the fearsome 90th Light Division. This crack German unit had been under Rommel's command since he first set his boots on North African soil. Its experienced tank fighters had given the Eighth Army no end of hell throughout the desert war. At El Alamein it had been battered nearly to pieces. However Rommel, despite his protestations about his lack of supplies, had in fact recently received enough supplies to pump life – and new tanks – back into this division. The 90th Light was alive and swinging. Like ghost ships, Rommel's desert Panzers seemed to be immortal. 'We continued to meet old opponents right through to the bitter end of the campaign, and it used to be said that Eighth Army would be pursuing "90 Light" till the end of the time', wrote Monty.

Monty's Fighting Machine Rolls On

The fact that the Panzer Army still had fight left in it did not come as a surprise to Monty nor was it enough to hold him back. Monty was the type of fighter who wouldn't relent until he had totally wrestled his opponents to the ground. He insisted on managing every battle from a mobile command post close to the frontlines, which he referred to as his Tac HQ, or Tactical Headquarters. He described it as 'the headquarters from which I exercised personal command and control of the battle … small, highly efficient and completely mobile on its own transport'. It enabled Monty to cruise freely around the frontlines to have a look at the situation as it developed. To give himself extra eyes and ears on the ground, he used a team of Liaison Officers, whom he referred to as LOs, to observe situations in different areas of the battlefield and report back to him.

Unlike other famed commanders of Second World War mobile warfare, however, Monty prevented himself from becoming isolated from his supply lines and 'the bigger picture' of battle by creating firm links between his Tac HQ and two other command centre nodes he set farther back – Main

HQ and Rear HQ. He centralized control of his entire headquarters administration at Main HQ and based his chief of staff there, while Rear HQ was his supply organization. This system enabled him to exercise perfect control over his army, which he called his ‘fighting machine’. Based at Tac HQ, Monty could wield the fists of the army, communicate with its central brain and wag its supply tail in the rear as needed. He was justifiably proud of having pioneered and perfected this system, which he used with great success throughout his campaigns. Staying near the front was inherently risky, but Monty, having a rare combination of boldness and common sense, found a way to satisfy his desire to keep close to the battle without compromising his responsibilities as a commander.

Rommel was a believer in managing things from up front also, but he persistently viewed himself as ‘one of the men’ in many regards and lacked the control of his army as an entire organism, most especially with regard to supplies. This was not only due to Rommel’s disdain for rear-area staff, whom he viewed as lazy and stubborn, but also due to deeply ingrained German bureaucracy that afflicted not only Rommel’s army but the German military as a whole. The German army was more about following procedures than innovating – a fact that had driven the creative Rommel to distraction and set him on the dangerous path he had followed into North Africa. Rebelling against the ruling order, Rommel had opted for total flexibility by commanding from up front with his troops and trying to force army administration to get its act together by sheer stubborn willpower. However, flexibility had its drawbacks. With its traditional rigidity now tightly bound by a dictatorship, the German military had become an organization in which only political favour with the top man could make things happen – the top man being Hitler. Once that man had stopped backing Rommel’s campaign, everything stopped working. Rommel’s flexible command policy could no longer avail him when his army was sentenced to death.

Monty urged his troops onward. The Highlanders smashed through Rommel’s front line spanning the coastal road like a powerful punch to the jaw, the Desert Rats tore into the Panzer Army’s core and the New Zealanders had just about enveloped Rommel’s forces completely from the

rear. ‘The Germans were in a desperate plight with 7th Armoured Division advancing from the east and 2nd New Zealand Division coming in behind’, wrote Monty. The battle began to stiffen. Monty’s trap was sprung and the desperate Italians, alongside the proud men of the Afrika Korps, were getting drawn into it. They were tangling with the teeth of the Eighth Army without realising its jaws were starting to close around them and they would soon be swallowed whole. The Axis troops were getting bogged down.

Rommel started to panic. This was exactly what he did not want. It was ‘essential to avoid getting our force too closely engaged in battle’, he wrote. It proved difficult for him to pull his men out of the fray. He gave orders for a battle group drawn from the 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions to go forward to hold the British off long enough for the other troops to withdraw. Yet as his troops became increasingly ensnared in grappling with the Eighth Army, Rommel rescinded his orders and wrenched the Panzer units back – ordering them to make a full retreat all the way to the Arco de Fileni in Tripolitania. As Rommel struggled to get the situation under control, a group of RAF bombers rained fire and destruction in the area where his headquarters were located. One of the trucks of his intelligence staff was blown up and several of Rommel’s staff cars were damaged. It was yet another near miss for the Fox.

Shattering the Hourglass

Oddly enough Rommel did well when forced to think on his feet. Having to use his wits for sheer survival brought back something of his old resourcefulness and freed him from the prison of his hopelessness. Lessons from the First World War came back to him. In those days he had taught his men to split up whenever they were threatened with encirclement. It was a technique he had employed in Africa before as well. Using this method, Rommel’s army would suddenly seem to disintegrate as it dissolved into individuals who splintered away from each other into the landscape. After slipping through the cracks like grains of sand from a shattered hourglass, the men would regroup and organized troops would crystallize in Rommel’s hand again. The German troops caught on to this technique quickly, which

is one of the reasons why Rommel's resourceful 90th Light Division managed to preserve itself from annihilation throughout the entire North African campaign.

Rommel managed to get his orders across clearly to all units and, rather than yank them backwards piecemeal, got the troops to dissipate. 'The enemy split up into small scattered groups and struggled through, suffering considerable losses in the process (including some 20 tanks and 500 prisoners)' during the battle, according to Monty.

This may have been a sound method to preserve the troops from casualties – still Rommel's main focus – but it was no way to hold a position. Monty had succeeded in stampeding into El Agheila and was now punting Rommel's troops around in the surrounding desert across a wide radius. The Axis men were literally scurrying to safety in individual escape bids and fleeing through tiny cracks in the Eighth Army. Montgomery was everywhere and his troops were coming thick and fast. There was nothing sluggish about this new Eighth Army – or its commander, as Rommel himself was forced to acknowledge when he made a last ditch effort to stave Monty off with rearguards drawn from his ace Panzer units. To stem the British tide, Rommel threw the 15th Panzer Division and 90th Light Division at them as he dragged his remaining troops away as fast as he could. He was surprised to find Monty already waiting for him.

'British infantry had managed to seize a dominating area of high ground ahead of the 90th Light Division's rearguard position in the early hours of 16 December', wrote Rommel. He added that German tanks of the 15th Panzer Division had arrived to keep the British away from the main highway called the Via Balbia only to find Monty's troops had already crossed over it. Monty's men spotted the German tanks and gave chase. 'The main British force followed hot on the heels of the division', wrote Rommel.

Having long since mastered the art of devilish demolitions, the Germans fell back on the use of mines to harry their pursuers. The men of the 15th Panzer Division somehow managed to escape by veering away into the desert and detonating a carpet of explosives set in a trap for the British forward units who tried to catch up with them. Rommel implied in his

writings that the British troops were blown to pieces due to this trap, and expressed his admiration for the cleverness of his own men in accomplishing this in an ‘outstanding manner’ which allowed them to escape with ‘the fewest casualties’ among themselves. He had not lost his ruthlessness when it came to the use of booby traps and this attitude seems to have spread throughout his army.

By 17 December, Rommel’s troops were again in full flight and Montgomery’s troops were again stampeding after them. The Fox at first pulled all his units back to Nofilia and planned to hold them there but Monty came surging through after him before he had a chance to organize. A ferocious and bloody clash erupted there between Monty’s triumphant New Zealanders and Rommel’s most seasoned German veterans. The New Zealanders had literally ploughed through the worst stretches of the Libyan desert with gusto and the speed of unbridled racehorses. Amazingly they were still going strong – probably because they had given everything in their path a hard thrashing – and were roaring far ahead of other British units. Monty made no effort to hold the Kiwis back. Fiercely proud of his own Australian upbringing, he loved his ANZAC troops and gladly let the New Zealanders off their leash to tear as much of the enemy to bits as possible.

Confronting the Kiwis were the men of Rommel’s original Afrika Korps unit (DAK) and his Reconnaissance Detachment 3. These veterans were Rommel’s toughest fighters. Most of them were barely recognizable as Germans. Their faces were weathered and their complexions had turned dark bronze. They were used to walking around half naked, hunting for their food, living in caves and holes, plundering goods from their enemies, prowling the dunes and surviving on the scantest material resources available – and most of them had learned to enjoy this life. The hardest elements of the Afrika Korps were men who relished a truly wild and free existence and saw the treacherous Sahara as a challenge worth mastering. These were Rommel’s desert lions. They adored their Desert Fox, at whose side they had strived and become self-appointed lords of the wilderness. Well-aware that getting victories in an exotic place like North Africa was no easy task, these men had developed a true sense of elitism. The high level of

esprit de corps they possessed was one Rommel had also created among his mountain rangers in the First World War. The harder the conditions he placed them in and the more he demanded of them, the fiercer their pride became and the closer their bond. These were the men who were dearest to Rommel and whose lives probably weighed the most on his conscience at this point. He wanted to spare them from death even at the risk of seeming like a coward. They were ready to sacrifice themselves for him.

The battle that unfolded between both sides at Nofilia was described by Monty as ‘sharp’ and Rommel as ‘hard’. In other words, it was bitter and gory – one of those short but hideous types of desert battles that left the sands strewn with flaming streams of burning fuel, pieces of twisted and burnt metal, smoking black coffins of tanks, shattered bodies and pools of blood that dried quickly in the sun. The clash between the tenacious New Zealanders and the equally tenacious Germans turned into an ugly deadlock. The British blasted many of Rommel’s tanks that had survived El Alamein. Many of the bronzed Germans who had learned to thrive in the desert would never leave the glare of its cruel sun. Even as they fell, however, the unyielding men of the Afrika Korps took no less than twenty of the New Zealanders’ tanks with them to the grave. The wastelands around Nofilia became a smouldering cemetery.

This was not the end of the pursuit, however. Monty was relentless. For too long his country had suffered humiliation and defeat. He considered that a soldier’s duty was to serve, to fight and to die for his cause if necessary. Time and time again Monty proved himself more than prepared to make the same ultimate sacrifice himself. The battle for El Agheila had been messy and bloody for both himself and his tough opponent who, disappointingly for Monty, somehow had enough elasticity despite his wounds to scrape himself off the floor of the arena and scuttle away. However, Monty’s main goal had been to capture El Agheila and prevent Rommel from ever using it as a stronghold to attack Egypt again. Monty would not rest until the Axis troops were evicted from the area. He drove his troops onward until they had accomplished that goal.

Rommel was not only unable but unwilling to expend his available troops further. He had given his men orders to fight while pulling back only.

There would be no more ‘victory or death’ orders on his watch. ‘There was no hope of opposing a British outflanking thrust with the motorized forces’, he wrote. ‘It would therefore have been suicide to have remained in the position any longer.’ Many of his original German Afrika Korps veterans managed to survive their engagement with the New Zealanders and withdrew, breaking off from battle and speeding away to the west along with other survivors Rommel had managed to rally for the escape. Other men of the Panzer Army and surviving Italian forces disintegrated loosely across the desert and fled in fragments. The Fox still possessed enough of his uncanny power to magnetically pull those fragments together again and reform his army at a greater distance away – a much greater distance. He wanted to get as far away from Monty as possible.

By 19 December the battle’s outcome had been decided. What remained of Rommel’s army was beating a path across the horizon to Buerat, where Mussolini was now demanding it fight to its end. Rommel of course had other plans. Monty saw the exhausted faces of his victorious troops, who had managed, despite their worst fears, to expel their crafty enemy from his former stronghold at El Agheila. Monty also turned to behold his supply line. As the sun set on another decisive desert battle, Monty, as hot-blooded as ever, had a decision to make. Would he dare to follow Rommel immediately and plunge again into the abyss? It would have been a tempting prospect at this point. The enemy was staggering as he fled. Could Monty get away with damning the proverbial torpedoes and leapfrogging ahead for another few hundred miles? Another commander, tasting more glory on the air, might have ventured it – might have whipped his tired men onwards and ordered the clerks in the rear to catch up in due course. But Monty was not that kind of man.

‘His [Rommel’s] morale had been further lowered and it was important to follow him up quickly, but the Eighth Army had covered 1,200 miles since 23 October and maintenance was our greatest problem’, wrote Monty, adding that ‘in view of my administrative situation I was now able to follow up with light forces only’ as Rommel departed from El Agheila.

It was true that Monty’s passionate disposition had got the better of him a few times during the pursuit. But this time Monty looked at his men – his

fatigued, battered and victorious men – and wanted more than anything else to let them have a well-earned rest amid their successes. He took a brief pause to allow his troops to recuperate. Monty also decided to respect the desert. He did not dare again to presume that the great soul of chaos which animated the vast wastes would cooperate with him.

The desert seemed to reward his humility. Again the skies over El Agheila were filled with pillars of smoke and a pall of dust from moving vehicles. The air hummed with the roar of tank motors, to which was added the droning engines of RAF aircraft and sounds of exploding mines and falling bombs. Again this odd and eerie stretch of wilderness had been the scene of desperate fight. Yet the desert turned the tables again. The Sahara had lent uncanny speed to Monty's troops as they had crossed the badlands. In a strange twist of fate, it was now the British who were riding high on the winds of victory and Rommel who was fleeing headlong from El Agheila – this time never to return.

CHAPTER 11

AFTERSHOCKS

’I have no longer to do with men, whom I do not fear,
I have to do with fate in the form of iron and lead.
Death is in the air, invisible and blind, whispering, whistling.’

Ardant Du Picq, *Battle Studies*

The battle had been decided. Faced with the choice of sacrificing his men’s lives in a bitter struggle, Rommel had chosen to withdraw yet again. As he had tried to take another step back, Monty had come in swinging and struck him some more hard blows, nearly throttling him and further draining what strength he had left. Rommel barely managed to escape – succeeding not because of any carelessness on the part of Monty, but entirely due to his own skill. While Rommel would not disclose how many casualties his army took during the battle, he was estimated to have lost about 20 per cent of his available forces. Several thousand prisoners were taken, according to Montgomery; many of these were Italians.

Over the next several days the scattered Panzer Army pulled back like a receding ocean tide. Rommel originally intended for his troops to make a

halt at Libya's Marble Arch, or the Arco de Fileni, a fixture in the terrain he had possessed for a long time and which had been the site of his meeting with Cavallero and Kesselring only a short time before. It marked a border between Cyrenaica, the region sandwiched between Egypt and Tripolitania, where the vital Libyan capital city of Tripoli was located on the Mediterranean. Again Rommel erroneously presumed on Monty lacking magnanimity as a commander.

A merciless opponent, Monty took full advantage of Rommel's weakness. While Rommel had used El Agheila as a launch pad to seize Egypt, Monty decided to use it 'in reverse' as a springboard to Tripoli. Even while he slowed the Eighth Army down for reorganization and a breather, Monty sent some light forces forward to take additional whacks at Rommel and thoroughly shake him out of Cyrenaica's dusty carpet. The aggressive but light mobile operations against Rommel in the wake of El Agheila were the equivalent of Monty's giving the region a good sweep with a broom before getting his whole 'fighting machine' on the march again.

This change in approach came as Monty, ever imaginative and coolly practical, had taken fresh stock of his options. There was no denying he had hoped to have his final battle with Rommel at El Agheila and he had been disappointed in this ambition. Instead of settling in for a good old-fashioned fight, Rommel seemed inexplicably determined to flee from him. It had happened too many times to count. On the brink of extinction, the shrewd Rommel always found a way to disappear into the woodwork. Evidently tired of this, Monty now decided to deal with the problem by just destroying the woodwork altogether. Instead of aiming for the enemy army, Monty took a step back and decided to focus on seizing territory as his supreme objective. He decided to conquer Tripoli without further ado. After he paused to straighten the Eighth Army, he would make a lunge for Tripoli and steamroll over any enemy forces in his path. If Rommel got in the way or became stuck along the road to escape, he would simply be squashed. But first Monty put out the Eighth Army's feather dusters to wipe up any stray specks of the enemy in the immediate vicinity. Before rallying his men for another major effort, Monty would boot the Axis forces out of what was now his backyard.

This required pushing forward into the wide, flat brown expanse beyond El Agheila known as the Sirte. ‘My orders provided that a forward base should be established at Sirte whence we would maintain contact with the enemy by means of armoured car patrols only’, wrote Monty. He needed to take hold of Sirte in order to secure forward air bases for the RAF. He had plans for the Marble Arch, too: ‘The 7th Armoured Division was to remain about Marble Arch and the 51st [Highland] Division in the Agheila position cleaning up the area.’ Mussolini’s prized Arco de Fileni, bleached and towering in the sun with its gruesome bronze statues, would become the site of Montgomery’s headquarters. Monty had an eye for symbolism. The sculptures of the Philaeni brothers being buried alive, rather than a mark of Italian pride, became an ironic reminder of joint Axis defeat.

Although his army remained imbalanced due to its overstretched supply line and theoretically vulnerable, Monty knew that the frazzled Rommel had taken too much of a beating to exploit this situation. He sent his sweeping forces forward.

The Buerat Dilemma

Rommel was aiming to settle in at Buerat, the inopportune dot in the middle of a flat plane of vulnerability that Mussolini had decided would make a good site for North Africa’s very own Battle of the Alamo. The Duce’s fixation on Buerat had given Rommel an excuse to pull troops away from El Agheila. But what would now give Rommel an excuse to pull the troops back from Buerat? While both Hitler and Mussolini wanted to see another bloodbath for its own sake, Rommel remained consistently unwilling to perform. Despite being ostracized in the aftermath of his disastrous European strategy tour, Rommel persisted in demanding answers about long-term policy in Africa. No policy statements were forthcoming. Hitler did not understand policy in the absence of propaganda. What he did understand was that Rommel had insulted him and was not on the propaganda bandwagon, and therefore cast him from his regal presence. All investments were now being made in Von Arnim’s newly-minted army in Tunisia, which had come of age under the benediction of Göring. Rommel’s

tried and true desert army continued to be treated like cannon fodder. Mussolini did not understand the concept of policy, either; his only policy was to try to upstage his ally-rival Hitler whenever possible and try to make Italy look good. Apart from these shallow ambitions, the Duce definitely knew he did not want to lose Italian territories, but how exactly to prevent this from happening was beyond his grasp. Bastico was there to rubberstamp whatever the Duce said and to hang onto Rommel's coat-tails to stop him from running. Despite having great freedom of action, the Desert Fox was in many ways still hobbled by the ball and chain of Bastico. While the Germans were loyal to Rommel, the Italian troops were unsure whether to run with Rommel or rally for Bastico. If the army split in two, it would be a dead army. Rommel needed cohesion.

'Marshal Bastico was a fundamentally decent man with a sober military understanding and considerable moral stamina', Rommel later wrote. 'He saw the position as I did … but had the misfortune to be charged by the Comando Supremo [under Cavallero] with the task of representing the Duce's point of view to me. As this was usually fallacious, he was always on bad ground in the argument which followed.' He added that Bastico did listen to his opinions and that he 'by his efforts at mediation contributed greatly to the fact that the retreat … was a success'.

On 19 December, Rommel rushed to demand solidarity from Bastico, who after having seen Monty's handiwork at El Agheila was now sufficiently terrified enough to believe that Italian North Africa was facing imminent collapse. Yet Bastico was unwilling to cross swords with Axis leadership and remained petrified with irresolution. Yes, the odds looked pretty bad. Would they survive a bareknuckle boxing match with the Tasmanian devil Montgomery, with his maniacal disregard for minefields, devious shifting tank blows and ferocious artillery barrages? Probably not. Then should they fight the match anyway or try to sneak away – again – before Monty bit them? These questions were all well and good, but who was willing to spoil the fantasy of the Duce? And where did Hitler fit into all of this? Sneaking away would only mean further losses of ground. Would it not be better to make a stand? Another round of epic discussions

took place which saw Rommel lambasted for having lost El Agheila in the first place.

On the German side, Kesselring was furious that Rommel had refused yet another chance at embracing the fire and brimstone of 'total war' for the Führer and making an honourable stand. He reproached Rommel for wasting fuel on a retreat when he should have used his resources to attack. He also accused him of nipping into Luftwaffe fuel when he was not supposed to. Like other German commanders who embraced Nazi idealism, Kesselring continued to believe it was better to annihilate oneself on the Führer's orders in a display of battlefield hara-kiri than surrender, flee or even temporarily withdraw; Rommel on the other hand was unapologetically humanistic. After the war, Kesselring would deny having knifed Rommel politically, but these denials came when Kesselring's reputation in Germany was undergoing a post-war facelift and he wanted to present himself to Afrika Korps veterans as their steadfast and smiling friend. Rommel clearly identified Kesselring as having taken part in Nazi political skullduggery on more than one occasion. In the aftermath of El Agheila, Rommel wrote that the Luftwaffe, under the direction of his archnemesis Göring and in cahoots with Kesselring, 'threw his [Rommel's] army under the bus' and tried to make 'scapegoats' of himself and his troops. This occurred not only after El Alamein but also with renewed ferocity after the Battle of El Agheila.

The Italians also were angry about Rommel's retreat from El Agheila. They had wanted to see some fighting and invested fresh Italian troops and tanks in defending the position. This now seemed to have been a waste. The Italians believed Rommel had left their troops in the lurch and sacrificed them needlessly during his retreat, when these men could have been put to better use attacking or defending. Naturally Rommel fought back against these accusations and insisted the retreat was necessary. Nobody really believed him anymore. All that anyone could see was Montgomery brutally thrashing his forces and the once bold Rommel now investing all resources in escaping.

'Resistance to the utmost must be given at Buerat!' thundered a direct order from Mussolini on 19 December, on the very day Rommel was

arguing with Bastico that the army needed to evacuate even further and dig in at the outskirts of Tripoli. Evidently wanting to drill the message firmly into Rommel's mind, the Duce sent a repeat of his orders to Bastico's HQ: 'I repeat, resist to the utmost at the Buerat position!'A brief argument erupted between Rommel, Bastico and other Italian officers, in which Rommel expressed his disgust at being told for an umpteenth time to make a last stand somewhere 'just because'. The debate fizzled out. The Duce was after all in charge of Italy and, with the exception of Rommel who had already declared himself willing to abandon all of North Africa, nobody else could think of any better options.

Straddling a fine line between defeat, surrender and getting fired, Rommel decided that Buerat was as good a place to try to hunker down as any. Obeying their Duce, the Italians who had been ferried from El Agheila to Buerat had already been hacking away in the dust in an effort to build a line of defences. This was a shoddy line strung between a few gnarly oases. In the opinion of Monty, who had already taken notice of this would-be bastion, the oases looked like tougher defences than the whole fortification line, which was indeed a poor comment on Buerat. The only thing that Buerat had going for it was Rommel's age-old accomplice – mines. Rommel's troops managed to lay no less than a whopping 80,000 mines in a fresh 'Devil's Garden' planted all around Buerat. The type of mine used was primarily the cheap and nearly undetectable S-mine, which looked like a tiny music box and blew people to pieces.

Rommel drove around Buerat and was fairly aghast to see that the position was exposed to, and therefore approachable from, the open desert in most directions. He already knew that it was vulnerable but seeing the feebleness of it up close rather than on a map really drove the point home. Needless to say he started planning another retreat – he had in fact been considering how to scoot away from Buerat since before being ordered to stay there – but nevertheless challenged Bastico about the lay of the land. Looking around the area, Rommel saw no reason why Monty couldn't just march clear past him. He demanded to know from Bastico what to do if Monty simply 'chose not to do battle with the Buerat garrison'. The answers he received were muddled and essentially amounted to Rommel's

duty being to preserve Italian forces from destruction. Exasperated, Rommel would do his utmost to have mines laid in every possible place and arrange tanks and 88mm guns to delay any British advance.

Unpleasant Surprises

Monty was not in a particular hurry to get to Buerat and planned to knock it out after the rapidly approaching New Year 1943. As much as he wanted to squish Rommel once and for all, his Eighth Army was now so distended due to its ceaseless desert rampage that it was now fairly hobbling and getting tangled up over itself. Buerat was several hours away from El Agheila across another wide stretch of desert. The most practical thing for Monty to do was briefly reorganize before driving a firm British stake into the heart of Libya by seizing Tripoli, which he planned to accomplish within 10 days in early January 1943. This was a more worthwhile goal now than wasting more time trying to pin down Rommel, who was now less of a cunning fox than a slippery fish.

'I had always to take into account the possibility of the enemy withdrawing earlier than I hoped, and my plan was made to cover that eventuality', wrote Monty. 'I estimated that I could resume the offensive on 15 January, and decided that I would not start before then whatever Rommel did, but that once the Army was set in motion, it would go straight to Tripoli.' However Monty was not finished with Rommel – there was still the matter of the total expulsion of Axis forces from the Agheila bottleneck and the Sirte to take care of.

Again Rommel looked across the horizon and saw things quieten down briefly, and again he assumed – mistakenly – that Monty was going to immediately settle down. Prior to getting settled at Buerat, the first plan Rommel made was to hold down the Sirte area and concentrate his forces around the Marble Arch while the Buerat troops continued building up their fortifications. Not unlike Hessian mercenary troops in December 1776 who had distinctly not expected George Washington to cross the Delaware, Rommel also anticipated his troops would have a brief respite for Christmas. The German troops assumed they would have time for a

Weihnachtsfeier, or Christmas party, on their beloved traditional holiday on 24 December. However, Monty very much intended to spoil Rommel's Christmas – although he had made sure to order plum puddings and turkeys to be sent forward from Cairo for every man of the British Eighth Army to enjoy for the holiday, no matter where they were.

In these early days in North Africa, Rommel was having a difficult time getting to know Monty as an opponent and thus continuously experienced a series of unpleasant surprises at his hands. Rommel had become a bit complacent himself after his long record of desert victories. He wrote that he believed the British were temperamentally unsuited to desert warfare whilst praising the rugged ingenuity of fellow German soldiers. He even declared that the only kind of battles the British were good at were those in which they could remain static – in other words, that the British only did well when allowed to fight mulishly in one place like a herd of angry tortoises. While it is true that the British excel at being steadfast in adversity and that throughout history British soldiers have defied fate to hold ground in pitched battles, Rommel's claim was sweeping and inaccurate. To say an entire national army only fights well when not moving is like saying that a person dances well when they are sitting or swims well whilst floating, which amounts essentially to stating they are inept. Rommel had formed this impression of British inferiority based on his early experiences in North Africa and these assumptions fell far short of what the British military proved capable of. The Desert Fox had arrived at these self-satisfied conclusions before he met Monty. He was therefore in for some nasty shocks – including when pulling back into the Sirte area in the aftermath of El Agheila. He continued to mistakenly expect the ferocious Monty to suddenly transform into a balking Auchinleck or a wavering Wavell after every battle.

Presuming there would be some kind of respite for Christmas, Rommel went out hunting gazelles on 24 December. He started his jaunt by following what he assumed were the tracks of a British SAS vehicle in the hopes of capturing some SAS men, but ended up chasing a truck full of his own Italian soldiers instead – who frantically fled from him for quite some distance without first stopping to see who he was. Gazelle hunting proved

more rewarding. Rommel shot some Christmas dinner and was looking forward to fresh wild game despite his troubles when, unexpectedly, Monty cast a long shadow over the festivities. ‘When I got back to my command post I learned that the British in the meantime had broken through into Sirte from the south with 4,500 vehicles and were rolling westward’, wrote Rommel, caught off guard by this development. He was upset that Monty had ruined the Christmas plans of his Panzer troops. ‘Already in Sirte the 15th Panzer Division had gathered for a *Weihnacht* [Christmas] celebration – and now they had to clear out and get away from this area as fast as possible’, he wrote regretfully. More British vehicles came barrelling across the Sirte region over the next several days.

After pausing to allow his men to feast and enjoy the fruits of their victories at an especially memorable 1942 Christmas, Monty would go on to launch his sweep towards Tripoli with the Battle of Buerat, which he scheduled for 15 January 1943 and kicked off a day earlier with a night attack on 14 January. The attack was a complex weave of thrusts, with two fists of the Eighth Army punching down the coastal road, and other grappling hooks launched through the desert to hit enemy forces from unexpected directions. The coastal attack would be conducted by the trusty 51st Highland Division while the Desert Rats of the 7th Armoured Division and the doughty New Zealanders would continue raiding through the open desert. The 22nd Armoured Brigade would form a flexible weapon in the centre of the two thrusts that could be brought to bear as needed. Launching a shifting array of tanks and vehicles at his enemy, Monty succeeded in deceiving and confusing Rommel even up to the capture of Tripoli.

Although Rommel had received intelligence reports that Monty would be ready to attack on 15 January, the attack on the night before took him by surprise and so did the fact that Monty went barrelling straight for Tripoli. The Panzer Army got caught up in the undertow of the Eighth Army’s irrepressible tidal wave. Aside from having a difficult time predicting what Monty would do, Rommel also overestimated him, believing Monty had thrown 650 tanks into the initial fray at Buerat when in reality the number was only 450. Although Rommel’s forces continued to disperse like sand

granules and reassemble elsewhere, it was all they could do. They continuously lost ground.

Monty made several risky wagers in his Tripoli campaign that ultimately paid off. The first bet was driving straight for Tripoli despite that his administrative situation had not yet fully recovered from the stresses and strains he had put on it. He calculated that he needed to take the city within 10 days, or the engine of his 'fighting machine' would utterly collapse and possibly force him to withdraw. This being unacceptable, Monty assumed more powers during the battle – aside from commanding the whole Eighth Army, he personally took command of the attacking coastal forces. He controlled both the army and the coastal assaults from his mobile Tac HQ, in which he moved forward among the central troops of the 22nd Armoured Brigade in the eye of the battle's hurricane. It is a testament to Monty's remarkable energy, initiative, powers of intellect and management that he was able to personally wield instrumental forces during the battle while directing the orchestra of the whole army. Monty would go on to successfully capture Tripoli on 23 January 1943. He made a triumphal entry into the city, which was soon visited by Winston Churchill.

PART IV

WITH FATES CHANGED FOREVER

CHAPTER 12

ANALYSIS OF THE BATTLE

‘I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.’

T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

With Montgomery’s victory at El Agheila, the door to Egypt was closed to Rommel forever. Never again would there be any chance for Rommel to march on Cairo, or even hope to behold the glimmer of vibrant civilization along the Nile Valley. Once the portal to Egypt had belonged to him. Now it was firmly shut. With this strategic triumph, Montgomery had eliminated a significant threat not only to the British in North Africa but to the British Empire at large. Hitler and Goebbels had dared to hope that Rommel would seize the Nile and give the Third Reich a firm foothold in the Middle East. Monty ensured they would never again be given the same chance.

The Battle of El Agheila was a truly decisive one. Yet it was messy and confused. Both generals had been uneasy going into it. Despite Rommel holding conspicuous advantages, Monty had proved stronger and won the

day. However, this was not set in stone from the outset. Monty had feared a possible severe blow from Rommel. Likewise Rommel had been acutely afraid of him.

Fear had been an important element in this struggle – more so perhaps than in any other battle in the North African theatre of the war. How had it shaped the battle's outcome, and why did things go the way they did?

Fears and Mistaken Assumptions

Each commander had some sharp commentary regarding the other's conduct during the battle that sheds light on some of the fears they had about one another and how they underestimated their own abilities.

Rommel's commentary written in the aftermath of his North African campaign – which ended in disgrace for him – is considerably more prejudiced than Montgomery's. His chief criticism of Monty at El Agheila was that: 'Experience must have told him we would not accept battle … He should not therefore have started bombarding our strongpoints and attacking our line until his outflanking force had completed its move …' However, Rommel ignores the advantages that he himself possessed at El Agheila: namely the fact that Montgomery's troops were vulnerable to attack had Rommel chosen to exploit the gaps in his lines, and also potentially faced a protracted bloody siege given the immense strength of the natural defences within El Agheila's terrain. Rommel himself had considered ambushing Monty, having consulted with Navarrini and angling to get more troops and supplies he wanted for the manoeuvres. When these extra resources failed to appear, Rommel was prepared to write off the troops, guns, tanks and fuel he had available as no good. Furthermore, Rommel falsely accused Montgomery of being 'overcautious' and 'never … following up boldly and overrunning us' – yet Monty had been the opposite of cautious from El Alamein onwards, and following up and nearly overrunning Rommel is precisely what Monty had been doing consistently since then. Rommel himself had constantly complained of the risk of being overrun and of Monty appearing too fast in pursuit to allow him to settle in for a potential siege at Tobruk and defend other areas.

Bitterness and wishful thinking tainted some of Rommel's writings about this period – particularly when it came to Monty and the British. He exaggerated British difficulties, crowed about every setback he claimed that Monty suffered and painted his own losses as being due only to material shortages and the incompetence of higher leaders. He alleged that the British had extreme difficulty in taking possession of the city of Tripoli – which in fact was not the case – and made no mention of himself actually losing the city. In a clash that occurred between the 15th Panzer Division, the Desert Rats and the New Zealanders on 15 January, Rommel claimed the Germans only lost two tanks in total. This is incredibly difficult to believe for many reasons. The actual number of German tanks lost, which was reported by Montgomery, was fifteen. Rommel once told his son that he refused to take any photographs during his retreat. It seemed he was also too proud – and too full of despair at the dishonour he had suffered – when he starting penning these reflections shortly after his defeat to be willing to give Montgomery or British troops any credit for actually winning their own battles.

The times that Monty paused were out of sheer necessity since he had distended his supply line. Of El Agheila, he wrote: 'My whole force was stretched administratively, relying largely on Tobruk, some 450 miles by road in the rear … My outflanking movement was necessarily weak owing to maintenance restrictions and it was launched into difficult country', whereas he noted Rommel's position was 'immensely strong and very heavily mined'. He sought to avoid casualties, not only out of his sincere personal affection for his men but also because he could not bring reserves forward rapidly. Monty also had to be very mindful of the immense significance of El Agheila from the perspectives of the British government, the world's media, and his troops who were still psychologically scarred from Rommel's past victories there. Any severe strike Rommel was able to deal to the British at El Agheila had the potential to shatter the fighting spirit of the Eighth Army. Monty had reasons to exercise a judicious amount of caution during the times he chose to do so.

From Monty's perspective, it was nothing less than astonishing that Rommel had failed to take fuller advantage of El Agheila as a strong

defensive position. The Desert Fox had recovered some of his tank strength. He had received additional artillery and troops and also fuel. The position was surrounded by truly hazardous patches of desert and salt marshes, and offered barely enough room for troops to manoeuvre straight down the coastline – straight into a reef of mines and booby traps. The Agheila 'bottleneck', as Monty called it, could easily have been turned into a killing field by Rommel had he put more effort into exploiting all the weapons, manpower and terrain features he had at his disposal. Yet instead of doing this, the usually aggressive Rommel had started to ship his infantry away to Buerat at night and then fled as soon as Monty attacked. Rather than fight, Rommel had again headed for the hills. Why? It seems Monty was never quite able to understand it. 'I can think of no sound military reason for Rommel's decision to stop at Buerat', he wrote. 'I believe that Mussolini ordered it and that Rommel could not disobey until our advance gave him the excuse. By then it was too late.'

However Monty was underestimating the Fox here as well. Rommel had no problem disobeying orders he viewed as foolhardy – and was particularly prone to flouting orders from both Duce and Führer after the catastrophe at El Alamein in which he had, to his eternal regret, obeyed them for 24 hours at the cost of his men's lives. Furthermore, Mussolini could not make up his mind exactly where Rommel was supposed to resist – at first, the Duce had pinned his hopes entirely on El Agheila. It was only after Rommel started complaining and raising a ruckus to be granted permission to resume his marathon dash down the Mediterranean coastline that Mussolini had reluctantly compromised and settled on Buerat. Had Rommel committed to an all-out defence of El Agheila and not wavered nor frightened the Italians with warnings of doom, the shift to Buerat would never have come up. Everyone in both the German and Italian High Commands, most especially Hitler and Mussolini, wanted Rommel to stay and fight. Contrary to Monty's assumption, Rommel actually had more freedom of decision in these matters. So, why did he choose to run? Describing himself before the battle, Rommel wrote: 'We were up to our necks in mud, and no longer had the strength to pull ourselves out.' Was his decision to flee due to farsighted pragmatism or mere bitterness?

The underlying thread that lies within both commanders' comments is fear. Both generals perceived each other as very strong going into this battle. Each wondered why the other did not choose to use his full strength. Both of these proud and aggressive men were in fact intimidated by each other at El Agheila – loath as they were to admit it. Alone in the middle of a particularly wicked expanse of desert, they were plagued with feelings of uncertainty that made them both hesitate before striking a blow. Rommel dashed off to Europe for advice and supplies. Monty breezed over to Cairo to get a bath and some comfortable sleep. Both of them hurried away to gain some extra strength before having to cross swords with each other. When they returned, both were nervous – Rommel was nervous that Monty would hit him when he wasn't expecting it, and Monty was nervous that Rommel would run off before he'd had a chance to tackle him. Monty was anxious to pounce while Rommel was extremely skittish. That is why the battle became so messy and confused. The battle turned into a fierce wrangle in which Monty bloodied Rommel and sent his feathers flying everywhere, and Rommel barely squeezed away.

The fact that Rommel was able to get away was not Monty's fault; it was a mark of Rommel's skill at improvisation and navigation in difficult desert conditions. Rommel and his men had become hardened nomadic warriors of the Sahara during the campaign. Given their expertise and toughness, it would have been difficult for any commander to capture and destroy Rommel's army all at once. Monty had succeeded in severely mauling the Panzer Army and blocking the reach of Hitler and Mussolini into Egypt with a bold and decisive blow. This huge strategic gain saw the British holding access to Egypt and also controlling a large part of Libya. Monty would cleverly use El Agheila himself as a launch pad to seize Tripoli.

Other Pivotal Factors: Health and Wellness

It is worth noting that each general took a very different approach to command and control in warfare which also contributed to the battle's outcome.

For Rommel, deprivation was a mark of honour. He considered himself an infantryman through and through, and took pride in rough living. He insisted on living in the same conditions as his men. He lived a truly spartan existence and allowed himself the barest of comforts. He refused to accept anything he viewed as 'extra privileges' – this extended not only to living arrangements but also food and rest, even when he was physically ill. If his staff attempted to provide him with any extra nourishment or care, he would become angry and obstinately refuse. However, living in this manner also caused him to become physically ill and tired. His constant physical discomfort was exacerbated by the emotional and mental stresses that accompanied the responsibilities of high command. Added to his chronic insomnia, choosing a life of hardship on the front line was disastrous for Rommel and certainly impacted his ability to think clearly and perform his duties as an army commander.

Monty was also an infantryman in heart and soul. He also took a very sparing and disciplined approach to war, and wanted to be near his men at the front – hence he had developed his innovative Tac HQ system, which allowed him to keep a hands-on grip on the fight while not losing control of his whole army and rear areas. Unlike Rommel, however, Monty held himself to higher personal standards. There was never any blurred boundary in his mind about whether or not he was an ordinary soldier or a general. Monty knew very well that he was a commander, and as such he viewed it as his duty to stay clear-minded and set aside specific times for rest. Possessing rare intellectual talents in addition to robust athleticism, Monty realized that a person needed to be not only physically fit but healthy and clean as possible in order to think and perform at their best. He saw no sense in military self-flagellation or a penitential approach to high command. Although he was not extravagant and rejected luxuries – as he believed correctly that self-indulgence clouded the mind and could weaken a strong warrior – Monty tried to make conditions as physically and mentally healthy as possible for himself and others. He did not over-exhaust his troops. He made sure that his men kept a high standard of hygiene and were not only physically strong but well fed. He also made sure to take care of himself – made sure that he ate, rested and bathed, and took time for

quiet reflection to think over his battle plans. As a result, Monty was rejuvenated for the fight while Rommel was not. ‘Keep fit and fresh, physically and mentally. You will never win battles if you become mentally tired, or get run down in health’, wrote Monty.

The two leaders also had a disparity in previous experience that may have impacted the outcome of the fight. While Rommel had never served outside of Europe, Monty had seen tropical service in India, Egypt and Palestine. Monty knew not to tempt fate when it came to exhaustion amid harsh tropical climates. While Rommel as a mountain ranger thrived in tough environments and excelled at desert fighting, Monty proved better at making the desert more bearable for himself and his men. As has been mentioned, Monty went to Cairo to wash up and rest just before the battle, while Rommel went straight from the desert to conference in Europe before returning, giving himself no time to be refreshed or recollect himself.

Rommel was also physically ill from non-stop desert fighting and still reeling from insomnia, to such a severe degree that his doctor would prescribe him sleeping pills in January 1943 to force him to rest. Insomnia reduces a person’s reasoning ability and makes them more reactionary and emotional, which is one of the reasons why sleep deprivation has been used in torture and interrogations. Rommel might have benefited from setting aside some quiet moments to gather his thoughts and recover some of his physical strength. However he took pride in working non-stop and chose not to do so. Stress and fatigue undoubtedly impacted him in the battle.

The wisdom Montgomery showed may have been due to his being older and having a wider breadth of military education and experience than Rommel. Monty had pursued more opportunities for education and professional development, had experience communicating in and working amid different countries and cultures, and focused on studying leadership and what he called ‘the human factor’. Rommel’s interests were more in technology, weaponry, training and tactics. While Rommel’s skill at innovation and creativity were put to brilliant use in earlier campaigns, Monty’s focus on human behaviour, both in terms of handling his own troops and dealing with Rommel, turned out to be a decisive factor in his many military successes, including at El Agheila.

The Keystone of the Battle: Morale

The most crucial element that influenced the course of this important battle was morale. Monty had stressed the importance of morale throughout his entire career and had written a great deal on the subject, which was one he studied assiduously. For Monty, morale was the Philosopher's Stone that could transform the metal of raw fighting men into gilded warriors who could achieve victory. He believed it was essential not only for troops to have good morale but their commanders as well. He wrote: 'A commander must watch carefully his own morale … If his heart begins to fail him when the issue hangs in the balance, then the enemy commander will probably win.'

Nowhere was the importance of morale more evident than at El Agheila in 1942. Morale was a key reason for Monty's necessity to seize the area without a severe setback. He needed to reassure his jittery men, and ironically his quest to preserve their own morale nearly undermined his own as he was unsure if he could jostle Rommel out of the place without too much trouble. Despite the concerns he had about his supply line, Monty was otherwise psychologically and emotionally balanced and had a positive outlook. He was heart and soul in the war. He believed zealously in the cause for which he was fighting. He was full of energy and prepared to do everything he could to win.

Things looked very different from a morale perspective on the other side of the battlefield. Rommel possessed favourable ground and resources that could have helped him make a tough stand against Monty. If he had put his energy into it, he could possibly have caused the British a serious hold-up at El Agheila. Kesselring censured Rommel for wasting fuel on retreat when he could have used it for mounting an attack. Kesselring raised an arguably fair point from a purely military standpoint – one that Montgomery himself wondered about. Rommel had indeed used fuel on retreating that he could have used to mount a tougher defence of his position. El Agheila had exceptionally good natural defences. Why waste them? Montgomery wrestled with the same question after the battle as Rommel's behaviour made no sense to him either.

The answer lay in that Rommel was no longer thinking in purely military terms during this time period. He was thinking of larger political and strategic matters. He had come to see the whole war in a different light. He had lost trust in his leadership. He was deeply shaken by the lack of concern about his troops from Hitler, Mussolini and other German and Italian officials. His experience of being ordered to annihilate himself and his troops at El Alamein had left him badly shaken. He was convinced El Alamein had marked a turning point that would result in Germany losing the war, that Hitler did not care about German soldiers' lives at all and the troops in Libya had been totally forsaken – all of which were true. These realisations hit Rommel within a relatively short time period, leaving him profoundly frightened and unsure of the future of his country as well as his army. Hitler had shocked him by throwing a ferocious temper tantrum when Rommel had attempted to discuss difficulties. The cold-blooded political machinations he witnessed from Göring and others disillusioned him. Rommel had no faith in what he was doing. He believed his side was doomed to lose the whole war. 'I was angry and resentful at … our highest command', he wrote. Uninterested in winning further victories or even in his own reputation, Rommel wanted only to try to preserve the lives of the men in his army. Due to his physical ailments as well as his loss of faith, he reacted emotionally to challenges instead of coolly seeking practical military solutions. His heart was not in the fight anymore. Therefore the advantages in his position and opportunities he could have exploited did not matter.

What truly turned the tide of the battle was Monty's ability to maintain the strong fibre of his morale as Rommel's own weakened morale crumbled away.

CHAPTER 13

BEYOND THE MIRAGE OF DEFEAT

’I am a soldier and stand in the battlefield,
With a rifle in my arm, and far from the world.
I’d shut the door and windows if I were at home,
And for a long time would want to be left alone.’

Gerrit Engelke, *Nach schwerem Traum*

When Rommel returned to Europe in March 1943, he was a changed man. Spring had seen him arrive in the desert and spring saw him leave. He had travelled to Africa two years earlier as an energetic tank commander brimming with ideas about mobile warfare, full of confidence and eagerness to prove himself. He had not expected the war to last very long. In the Sahara he had been given free rein to put his military theories into practice which had brought him a period of dazzling but brief success.

By the time he left Africa, he was broken. His family and associates noticed a deep and profound change in his behaviour. He never possessed

the same confidence or zest for his career or life in general. The usually optimistic Rommel instead was bitter and became increasingly cynical and prone to sarcasm and anger. Never again would he show enthusiasm for fighting in the war. His critics, particularly Göring, would unjustly claim that Rommel's personality changed simply because he was suffering from mood swings and was throwing a tantrum after losing in North Africa, and imply mockingly that he was a mental case. Rommel was aware of these rumours. He was also aware of other officers spreading rumours that his troops had not fought hard enough to win. That angered Rommel more than anything and involved him in many heated arguments with others.

Rommel had changed because he had found something in the desert – the truth about Hitler and the war. He had discovered first-hand that Hitler did not care about the fate of the fighting troops. He realized Mussolini also was just as careless with men's lives. He discovered the Axis alliance was a shallow act and politically conscious officers nurtured their own selfish ambitions at the expense of his soldiers. Rommel was a very gregarious and empathetic soul who bonded easily with people, and one of his most fundamental principles – one that defined who he was – was his genuine love for his troops. As a German soldier he also strived towards self-discipline. When Hitler ordered him to lead his men to 'victory or death' at El Alamein, his nature came into conflict with his sense of duty. Rommel's love for his fellow soldiers would win the day and see him retreat to save their lives – and keep retreating, even though he was well-aware that people including his own leaders were calling him a coward. However, he had at first obeyed Hitler for 24 hours and had the blood of his men – his beloved comrades – on his conscience. Not letting them retreat sooner haunted him. It was a choice he wrote that he regretted. This was a deep scar he would carry for the short remaining time in his life.

That was not the worst of it either. Rommel had struggled for many years to come to terms with his experiences in the First World War and to make the sacrifices of himself and his comrades meaningful. The nightmares he described during the war, his excessive preoccupation with the past, and the insomnia he continued to suffer from in the Second World War suggest he was still carrying the burden of unhealed traumas. If El

Alamein had struck Rommel an ethical blow, the manner in which he was forced to leave North Africa dealt him a moral injury almost worse. Being forced to leave his men in North Africa was a direct parallel of what he had experienced in 1918.

One of the things Rommel had never got over was being forced to leave the front in early 1918 when he was posted away on leave, and then ordered to join the staff behind the lines. The orders had come as a shock to Rommel. He had only intended to return to Germany for a short rest period before returning. Suddenly he was denied permission to go back to the front lines. Rommel was very group-orientated and if there was one thing that he could not stand, it was the idea of letting his friends down. Under no circumstances had the feisty young Rommel wished to leave the front or his fellow German army mountain rangers. He protested and tried to get back to his unit. However this was of no avail. Rommel was miserably forced to stand by and wait for news of his comrades as the war ground to its bloody end. Many of his friends died in battle. Rommel was so upset at having been compelled to leave them that he declined to write about any of his First World War experiences after he left the front lines. For Rommel, the whole war had ended after he had left his men at the front. He only wrote about his sorrow at having been forced to go. His book finished with a tribute to his friends who had died.

North Africa would see a repeat of this performance. Not long after losing Tripoli to the British, both German and Italian military officials were demanding that Rommel be fired. Accusations of cowardice abounded. He was accused of a severe level of disobedience of orders from both Hitler and Mussolini. The Duce was furious about the losses of territory and Hitler was ready to supplant the defiant Desert Fox who had dared to bare his teeth in the Führer's HQ. Rommel was so angry at everyone around him that he was at first willing to resign and leave. He reconsidered and then said he would not leave his troops, but would remain in action for as long as he physically could. However higher powers wanted Rommel gone. Eventually Rommel's doctor claimed he needed a mandatory period of sick leave in Europe. Again Rommel resisted, but again was compelled to obey on the basis of medical evaluation. He expected to return to North Africa.

However, as soon as Rommel got to Europe, Hitler prevented him from ever being reunited with his troops again. Control was given to Von Arnim, who had been manoeuvred into position as a replacement for Rommel by Hitler and Göring quite some time earlier. Rommel was aghast. As the army's former 'captain', he had desired and intended to go down with his ship. Despite his protests, Rommel was denied permission to return to the men. He felt – correctly – that he had been deceived into abandoning his comrades. This ultimate separation left Rommel utterly devastated. He wrote to his wife that the experiences had left him with 'a bad scar' and his men were 'very dear' to him. He made efforts to get in touch with his men in POW camps and sent mail to individual soldiers incarcerated abroad whom he was able to reach. This experience of being dragged away from his troops unexpectedly after a period of leave was a direct echo of how Rommel had ended his role as a mountain ranger during the First World War, and must have been truly shattering, as this was the second time in his life that it had happened to him.

From the perspective of a historian's armchair, it is easy to pass judgment on Rommel for his retreat and seemingly foolhardy decision not to make better use of his resources to fight at El Agheila. However Rommel was fighting a different battle during this time period – one that says much about his moral character, which makes his decision-making deserve to be seen in a different light. He wanted answers about the point of the war he was fighting. He wanted his leadership to take responsibility for the lives of the troops. He refused to be another Paulus at Stalingrad. Rommel has often been accused of being an ambitious scoundrel who thought only of his career. Evidence shows he was exactly the opposite. It is true that Rommel started his war in Africa with a myopic focus on proving his military worth and with an enthusiasm for the military freedom he found in the desert. Higher responsibility however brought him into contact – and conflict – with the dark forces at the top of the Axis food chain. Rommel turned against Hitler in North Africa in late 1942. He even dared to challenge Hitler openly and to argue with him in front of other people. He showed courage that few German officers were willing to. He regularly disobeyed both leaders of the Axis – then two of the most powerful men in the world.

Could he have put up a better fight against Monty? Probably. Was lack of fuel really to blame for all of his problems? No. Did emotion and physical distress cloud his military judgment at times? Certainly. However, it says something good about Rommel that he was troubled by his conscience and emotions enough to try to save his men at the expense of his own reputation when other German military leaders were willing to butcher their own people to satisfy their personal pride. After El Alamein, Rommel believed the war was unwinnable and did not want his men to fight and die for no reason. To save his troops' lives, Rommel was willing to lose the brilliant reputation he had built and to appear 'weak' in front of others, fighting only to allow himself to withdraw step by agonizing step backward across the dunes. His weakness, while at times militarily incomprehensible, was admirable from a human perspective.

Rommel left Africa in March 1943. The next year, as of 14 October 1944, he was dead. Hitler would be the author of his death. Rommel's journey to take a stand against Hitler did not stop after he left North Africa. It had only just begun.

The Sahara desert had given him victory and taken it away. In doing so, it stripped Rommel of all grand illusions he had about his own military abilities, and most importantly, about the leaders he was serving. Some say the desert is a place where people go to find God; others believe it the dwelling place of evil spirits. For Rommel, the desert was a place where he unexpectedly found truth. The wastes compel people to confront the bare essence of their humanity in the face of powers they cannot contend with. It rips all certainties away. It forces people to find what strength they have and learn what they are made of. The desert tests people. Perhaps Rommel had failed the test to be one of Hitler's most reliable generals. But he did pass the test to prove his moral mettle as a human being.

CHAPTER 14

FAME'S BLAZING SUNRISE

'Great in council and great in war,
Foremost captain of his time,
Rich in saving common-sense,
And, as the greatest only are,
In his simplicity sublime.'

Alfred Lord Tennyson,
Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington

In the Sahara, Montgomery not only found freedom but success. Others had doubted his views about morale being the most important factor in warfare. His victories in North Africa, accomplished entirely by his own initiative, were resounding proof of his expertise. He had successfully re-forged the Eighth Army into a close-knit and excellent fighting force. For his own part, he had demonstrated his great personal strength, being the cornerstone that held his army together and radiated confidence to inspire his men, and showing both valour and calmness in moments of deep crisis.

The desert is a place where one not only learns to be self-reliant, but where comradeship counts for everything. If a person is lucky enough not to have to face the tempestuous isolation alone, he or she soon discovers the strength – or weakness – of the ties that bind human beings together in a common purpose. Montgomery learned the hardships of his men first-hand. He experienced the same fears they did in the abyss, where human life was a flimsy thing between the dunes, the stars, and the endlessly revolving forces of chaos, fortune and death. 'My upbringing … had taught me to have resource within myself. I needed it in the desert campaign', he wrote.

In the desert, Monty drew as much strength from his men as they did from him. He would leave North Africa as the leader of a tried and true group of men who were not so much his soldiers but his friends. The Eighth Army was the apple of Monty's eye. He would refer to this army as his 'family'. Its multinational troops meant the world to him. Later on when called upon to leave the Eighth Army for a role in planning the 1944 Allied invasion of Normandy, the proud soldier would nearly lose his voice during a speech to his men and later, away from their sight, shed tears as he prepared to depart the airfield.

Success came to Monty in the desert because he was truly gifted. Victories came to him thanks to his rare talent for perceiving and working with the human side of warfare – that, and his quick and sometimes impudent wit, his boisterous smile, and the indomitable spirit that inspired his men and enabled him to rally troops of different nations under a common banner. He had been brash in the lead-up to El Agheila, but all in all, he had not presumed too much upon the desert's good graces. He recognized his limits against its power even if he sometimes pushed them. For that, the ungovernable spirit of the Sahara seemed to reward him. He would gladly take a piece of it with him for the rest of his life when he became Viscount Montgomery of Alamein.

The sun of Montgomery's fame rose in North Africa. But it was a harsh sun – one that brought the glare of merciless and ambitious gazes within both Axis and Allied nations, sparked jealousy and envy, heralded malicious rumours and invited politically motivated skullduggery. In the isolation of North Africa it had been fun for the rambunctious Montgomery to have

thrashed his opponent out in the desert with his bold troops and then gone swaggering around Cairo to public jubilation. As his fame increased, however, the initial sense of fun he experienced quickly turned to hardship.

Monty's talents brought him higher roles in command. These were opportunities that he as a hard-working and earnest soldier, wholly dedicated to the Allied cause, welcomed wholeheartedly. He was a man who devoted himself to public service throughout his entire life. He would soon learn there were others who sought out greatness and higher roles not because they embraced public service but because they were ambitious and wanted attention and renown. These men resented him. These self-appointed rivals included both American and British personalities. They distorted Monty's words and actions and constantly sought to undermine and sideline him, even as they exploited his military genius for their own gain.

Montgomery has been unjustly accused of being anti-American or being unable to work with Americans. A close examination proves that these accusations are mere unfounded rumours and it was not the case at all. Monty led American soldiers into battle in Europe and treated them with the same sincere kindness, selfless leadership and generosity of spirit that he showed to all his men. They recognized him for it. In fact Monty had many admirers among American fighting men who knew and worked with him. But these Americans too have been largely forgotten. Their voices have been drowned out by those whose influence was greater and whose insults were louder. Monty was honest in expressing and standing up for his inner convictions. His moral courage to disagree with other people cost him popularity. It is evidence of his profound integrity and strength of character.

Fame was a hard road for Monty to travel. He worked tirelessly, serving his troops, his nation and countries around the globe, even as he faced endless public scrutiny and political backbiting. The difficulties did not stop after the war. In fact they got worse. Monty became an object of ridicule in high society and the newspapers in both the UK and the USA even as he served in the Army for an unbroken 50 years and made sincere efforts through his writings, words and deeds to make the world a better place. It was a bitter fate for a man who had sacrificed so much – that, and the fact

that the peace he had long desired to follow the end of the wars he fought in never seemed to come.

Montgomery remained persistent in his devotion to pursuing professional excellence, promoting knowledge and the cause of world peace, encouraging good leadership and preserving the memory of the sacrifices of his troops to the end of his life. He wrote that if given the opportunity to live his life again, he would always be a soldier. He also wrote, humbly, that he believed leaders were made rather than born – that his own successes had been the result of good teaching, and he supposed anyone could be taught to become a good military commander. In that he was wrong. The man who everyone presumed was vainglorious actually had, in addition to the British tendency for understatement, a knack for underestimating his real worth. The truth is that Monty was a born leader. And he was much more than just an ordinary soldier. He was a truly great general.

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THE DESERT

1. This photo Rommel took of his German troops at the El Agheila position shows its difficult terrain, which mixed crumbling sand dunes with rocky soil and steep ravines. These natural barriers made the area difficult for tanks and vehicles to navigate, but an ideal position for the Desert Fox to exploit. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

2. The battle for control of North Africa unfolded across the mighty Sahara Desert, which often thwarted military plans with a vibrant life of its own. Wind played havoc across the sand seas and gave rise to massive sandstorms, such as this one observed by a British soldier in Egypt in October 1942. (Fold3)

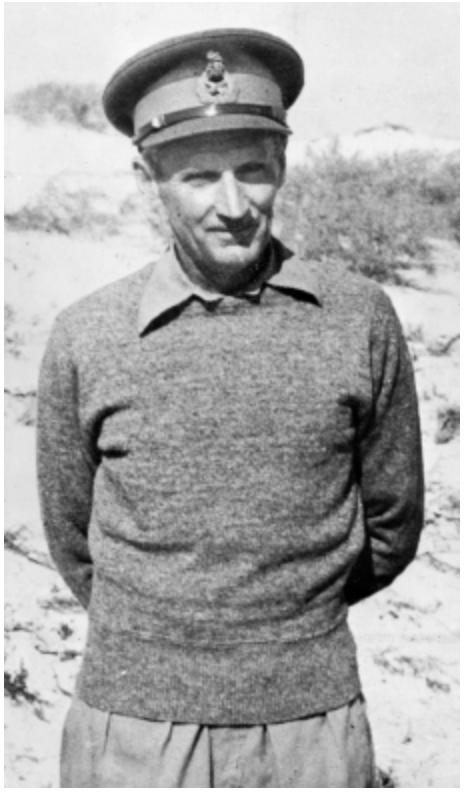
3. This image from Rommel's personal photo collection shows a German storage facility for water, a precious commodity in the desert, at the El Agheila position circa 1941. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

4. Sand dunes in the Sahara possess electrical frequencies and are known for their phenomenon of ‘singing’. Rommel took this photograph of a dune sea, likely in Libya, as he conducted aerial reconnaissance in 1941. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

5. Rommel taught his troops to make clever use of dust raised by their vehicles to fool enemy forces, giving rise to his fearsome legend as the crafty and invincible ‘Desert Fox’. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

6. This photo taken by Rommel likely shows the Wadi el Farigh, a vast natural obstacle located south of the El Agheila position. Although Monty initially worried about the hindrance this ravine would cause his troops during the Battle of El Agheila, his trusty New Zealand soldiers proved more than able to quickly navigate around it. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

MONTGOMERY



7. When he first arrived in Egypt to command the Eighth Army in August 1942, Bernard ‘Monty’ Montgomery usually wore a stiff officer’s cap and had not yet adopted his trademark black tanker’s beret associated with his public image. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

8. Prime Minister Winston Churchill (left) and CIGS Field Marshal Alan Brooke (right) pose for a celebratory photograph with the triumphant Monty (centre) outside his Tac H.Q. after the Eighth Army's triumphant conquest of Tripoli in 1943. In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of El Agheila, Monty set his sights on seizing Tripoli and succeeded, much to Axis chagrin. (National Museum of Denmark)

9. Monty (right) worked well under the loose supervision of Field Marshal Harold Alexander (left), who oversaw all British forces in the Middle East. The fiercely independent Monty worked freely to develop his battle plans without the direct involvement of Alexander, contrary to post-war myths. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

10. Monty (right) flashes a grin and shows his tattooed arms as photographers film him with RAF Air Marshal Arthur Coningham in North Africa during Rommel's retreat from El Alamein in late 1942. Like other airmen, Coningham often took a dim view of land forces, leading to rumours criticising Monty and the Eighth Army that CIGS Alan Brooke put to rest. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

11. Crowds cheer for the triumphant Montgomery who gives them a bright smile and a salute as he enters Sousse, Tunisia in 1943. As the sun of Rommel's military successes set in North Africa, Monty's star rose, bringing not only fame but unfounded criticisms and the envy of his peers. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

12. Soldiers of the Eighth Army salute British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (centre right) as he strolls beside Monty (centre left), wearing an Australian bush hat, while on a visit to Egypt in 1942. Churchill and Brooke observed great improvements in the Eighth Army under Monty's command within a short time period, but it would take until October 1942 for Monty to get the battered army he inherited into proper fighting shape. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

ROMMEL

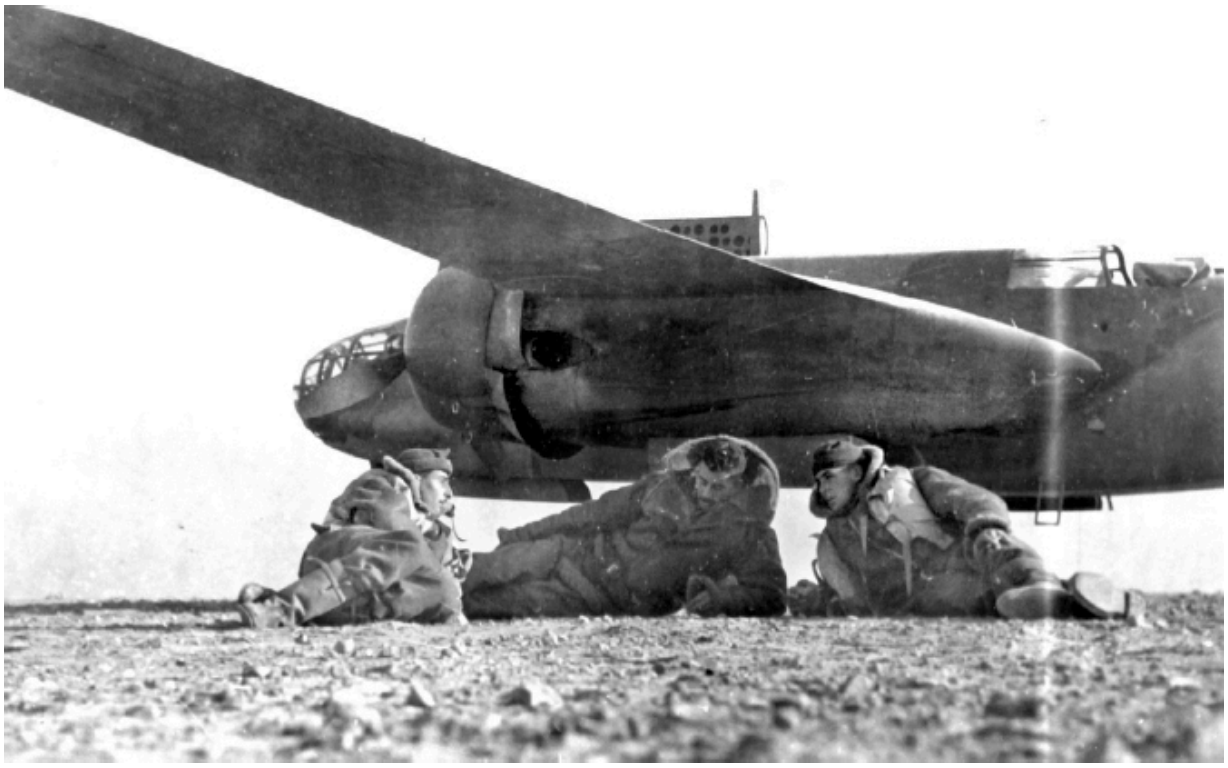
13. Smoke rises in the distance as Rommel (right), wearing the yellow scarf made for him by his daughter Gertrud, consults with his officers. Both Rommel and his men appear dirty and unshaven. Lack of attention to health and hygiene negatively impacted Rommel's health and strained his army, while Monty prioritized cleanliness in the Eighth Army with stellar results. (Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg)

14. Rommel's seasoned German tank crewmen pose for a photo during his string of desert victories near Sidi Omar on the Libyan-Egyptian border circa 1941. The annihilation of his forces at El Alamein in November 1942 prompted Rommel to disobey Hitler's 'victory or death' command and order a full retreat to save what remained of his army. (National Digital Archives of Poland)

15. After disobeying Hitler and Mussolini by retreating from El Alamein, Rommel (right) was ordered to report directly to Italian Army Marshal Ettore Bastico (left) and cease direct communication with the Führer and Duce. Bastico attempted to force Rommel to stand fast at El Agheila. (Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg)

16. The effect of rainstorms in the desert after the Second Battle of El Alamein in 1942 can be clearly seen in this rare photo taken during Rommel's retreat, showing Rommel (centre) beside one of his staff vehicles that is bogged down in sand turned to mud. While the rugged Desert Fox managed to overcome the effects of storms thanks to his expertise at wilderness living, the British Eighth Army, which included new recruits as well as desert veterans, was severely slowed up in pursuit of him due to the impact of the rain. (Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg)

MONTY'S ARMY



17. An RAF crew flying in a Douglas A-20 Boston medium bomber catch a brief moment of peace on the sands of Libya while waiting for their next mission to harass Axis forces. Bombings by the RAF helped grind down Rommel's forces but airpower alone proved unable to break Rommel's wily desert army. (Fold3)

18. Men of Monty's Eighth Army brave German artillery fire and explosions of mines and booby traps as they drive Rommel's troops from Egypt into Libya in winter 1942. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

19. Heavy rain following Monty's victory at El Alamein turned the desert into an ocean of mud that slowed down the Eighth Army's vehicles chasing Rommel. This newsreel image shows Monty's troops using a bridge to bring up artillery over the otherwise unnavigable mud. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

20. To inflict both delays and psychological terror on the British, Rommel had his soldiers leave thousands of deadly mines and booby traps in their wake, including devastating Teller mines, small wooden S-mines and all manner of improvised explosives. The explosives took a deadly toll on Monty's troops, shown here clearing mines in the desert, but did not stop the Eighth Army from pressing on to defeat the enemy. (Fold3)

21. Monty's soldiers surge into Nofilia, overtaking Rommel's forces as they pull out from El Agheila and forcing him to give ground sooner than he planned. A ferocious and bloody clash erupted at Nofilia between Rommel's original Deutsche Afrika Korps (DAK) veterans and Monty's intrepid New Zealanders, which saw the Germans routed and an estimated twenty British tanks destroyed. (Fold3)

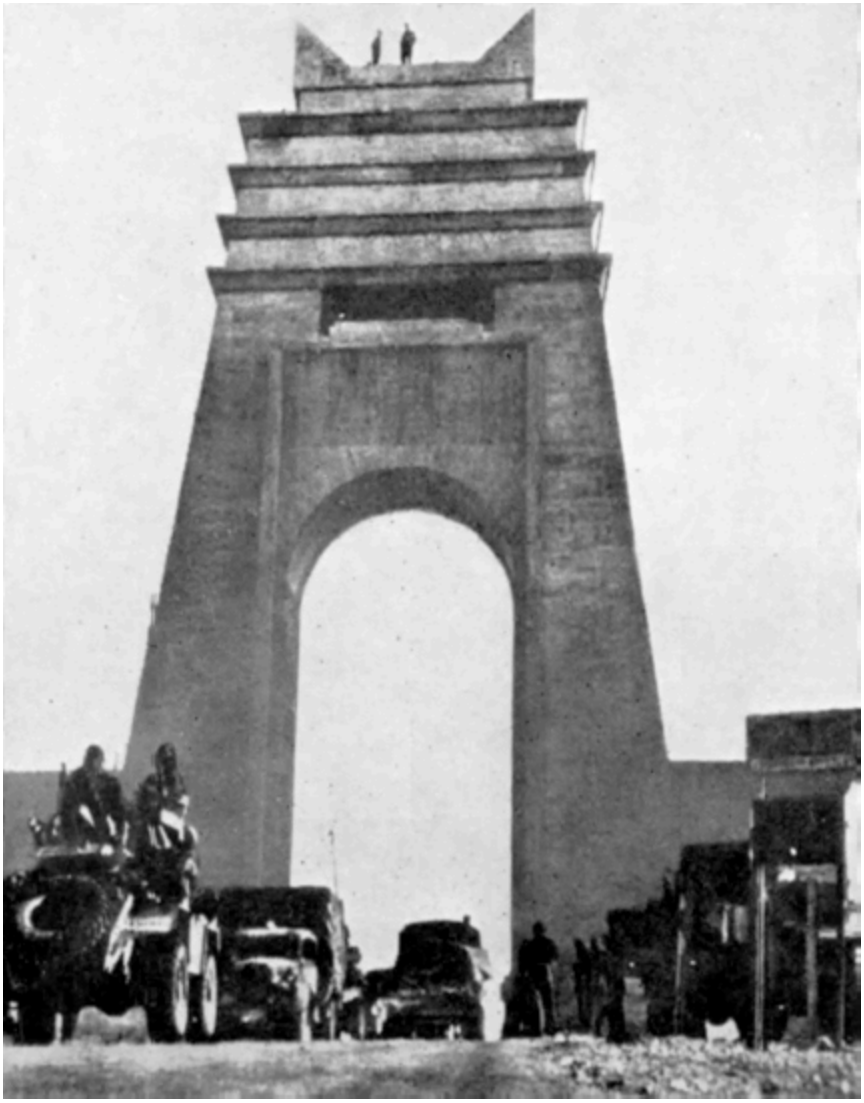
22. The Gordon Highlanders march proudly into Tripoli following the Eighth Army's capture of the city under Monty's leadership on 23 January 1943. Thanks to Monty's focus on restoring the battle prowess of the 51st Highland Division, which had previously been defeated by Rommel in France, the sound of bagpipes heralded British victory at both El Alamein and Tripoli. (Fold3)

23. British infantry press onward with fixed bayonets to drive Rommel's forces away from the Nile once and for all during the Second Battle of El Alamein in November 1942. (Fold3)

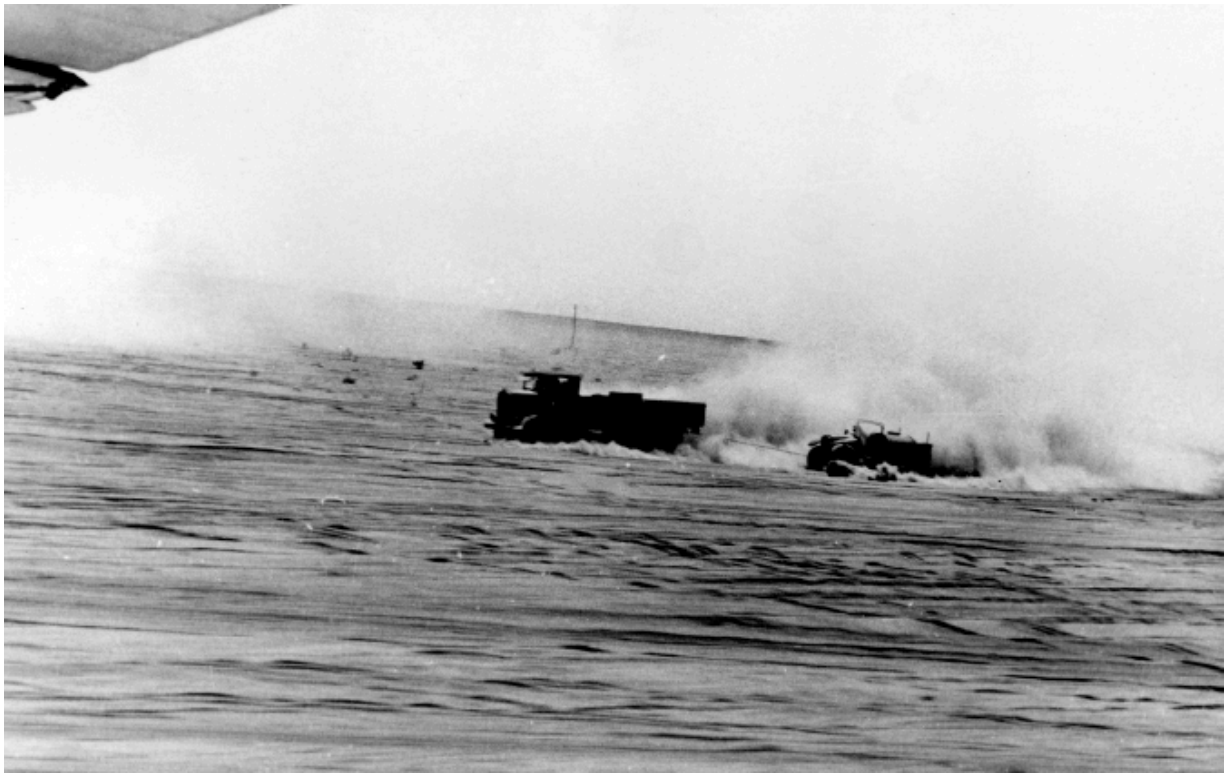
24. Before Montgomery arrived in North Africa, troops of the Eighth Army drawn from all corners of the British Empire and Allied forces from European countries fighting under the British flag were thoroughly demoralized, disorganized and lacked all semblance of hygiene, as can be seen in this photo of grimy British prisoners captured by the Germans in June 1942. (National Archives of the Netherlands)

25. Soldiers of Montgomery's re-energized Eighth Army, visibly physically fit and carrying themselves with confidence, march past a burning German tank left on the battlefield at Alam Halfa, Egypt in September 1942 in a prelude to their decisive victory at El Alamein. (Fold3)

ROMMEL'S ARMY



26. The Arco de Fileni, also known as the Marble Arch, was built as a monument to fascist Italian rule in Libya. Dark, coffin-like spaces above the archway on either side contained gruesome bronze sculptures of the legendary Philaeni brothers of ancient Carthage, showing them being buried alive. Here British troops are shown advancing through the arch, which became the site of Monty's headquarters shortly after his victory at El Agheila. (Fold3)



27. This photo taken by Rommel shows a technique the thrifty Swabian used with great effect during the North African campaign, particularly during his retreat—towing vehicles through the desert to conserve fuel. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

28. Two German soldiers smile for Rommel's camera as he snaps a photo of them at work. Rommel loved his men and enjoyed mingling with his frontline troops, taking thousands of pictures of them. Hitler's orders for the troops to die in vain shattered Rommel's view of German leadership and made him lose all enthusiasm for fighting the war after El Alamein. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

29. Rommel snapped this photo of his bronzed and hardy German troops, who he nicknamed his ‘Africans’, at work in the desert. Rommel’s men embraced a nomadic lifestyle, creating bunkers and ammunition dumps in desert caves, hunting wild animals for food and using materials plundered from their enemies. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

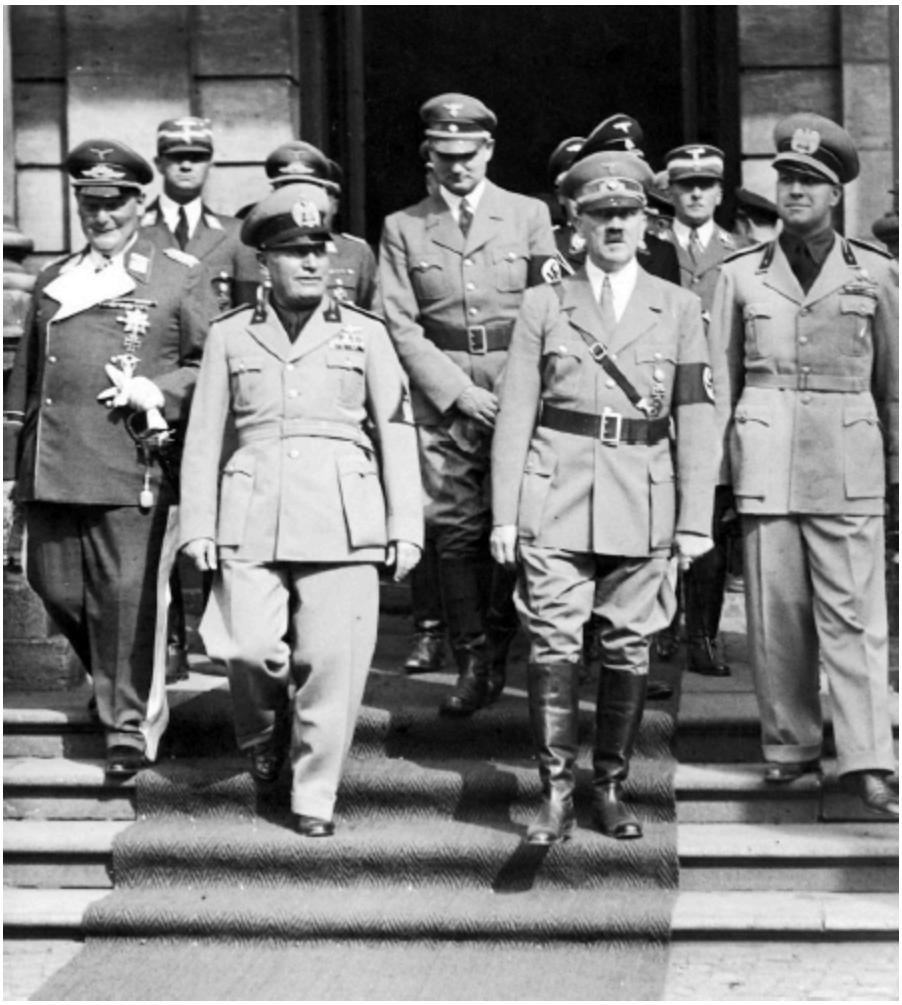
30. Rommel snapped this photo of his Italian Bersaglieri troopers firing artillery from the back of a truck. Although Rommel took pride in his Bersaglieri troops, they suffered from poor and outdated equipment, particularly with regard to tanks. It appears Rommel sought to overcome this by training them to fire artillery mounted in transport vehicles. (US National Archives and Records Administration)

31. A Luftwaffe cargo plane delivers supplies for Rommel's army in early 1943. Despite Rommel's tendency to blame all of his problems on supply shortages, he did in fact receive additional supplies by air and sea during his retreat which improved his military situation in Libya and as he prepared to face Monty at El Agheila. (National Digital Archives of Poland)

32. Flies, a true plague in the Sahara, can be seen covering the shirt, canteen and protective face net of this German soldier as he attempts to take a drink of water. (National Museum of Denmark)

THE AXIS

33. Italian Marshal Ugo Cavallero (left) and German Field Marshal Albert Kesselring (right) were two ambitious officers who clashed with Rommel in North Africa over their willingness to please their political masters at the troops' expense. Cavallero habitually lied to both Rommel and Mussolini, while Kesselring was devoted to Hitler and took offence at Rommel's willingness to criticize the Führer and disobey Hitler's 'victory or death' order. (National Digital Archives of Poland)



34. Rommel's actions in the field were bedevilled by his service to the two ostensibly allied but competitive dictators of the Axis alliance, Nazi Germany's Adolf Hitler (center right) and Fascist Italy's Benito Mussolini (center left), neither of whom had sound strategic vision. On the sidelines, *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring (left) sought to sabotage Rommel's army in North Africa for his own political gain, while Mussolini's son-in-law, foreign minister and all-round accomplice Galeazzo Ciano (right) despaired of Italy's military fortunes and wrote withering observations of Axis leadership in his wartime diary. (National Digital Archives of Poland)

35. A German propaganda cameraman kneels to film Rommel's troops in action during a desert battle circa 1941 in this photo taken by the Desert Fox himself. Rommel believed wartime propaganda was valuable for intimidating battlefield enemies but became vulnerable to his own legend as Hitler and Goebbels sought to turn Rommel into a media puppet to serve Nazi political aims, which ultimately cost him his life. (US National Archives and Records Administration)